VOICE FILE NAME: COHP The Hon Bob Hawke

Key:
SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
BH: The Hon Bob Hawke (Respondent)

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Bob Hawke on Monday, 31st March 2014. Thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me. Sir, how you did become interested and involved in things Commonwealth before you went into Parliament? Was this through the Commonwealth trade union organisation and links?

BH: No, there was no significant Commonwealth trade union link.

SO: So, this was not something that drew you in through the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), with links to the Commonwealth Trade Union Council's support for South African trade unions?

BH: I led the fight here against apartheid as President of the ACTU, including particularly the Springbok tour in 1971. And that led to the banning of the South African cricket tour which had been scheduled – that was something that I sorted out with Sir Donald Bradman. That was interesting. After the Springbok tour had finished, I got a call from him asking if I would go to Adelaide and see him some time. So, I went there. It was confidential. I went to his home, and he said, "Bob," he said, "this controversy is bad. We've got a cricket tour coming up." He said, "You know, I just have a very firm belief that politics should not be intruded in the sport." And I said, "I couldn't agree more." I said, "It was the South African Government that has introduced politics into sport by decreeing politically that no non-white person will represent their country. They introduced politics into sport." And Don was a very shrewd old bloke, and he looked at me for about thirty seconds and then he said, "Bob, I've got no answer to that." And that was it. The tour was off.

SO: So, you thoroughly approved, then, of the Commonwealth coming up with the Gleneagles Agreement sporting ban in 1977? What you're suggesting is that you were ahead of the game on this one.

BH: Yes, well ahead.

SO: Did you help to organise pressure on the other South African team visits? You mentioned the Springboks and cricket, but what about other aspects of sport?

BH: Well, as far as we're concerned, there was no sporting organisation [that] should have anything to do with the sport in South Africa.

SO: So, did you have any contacts with the Commonwealth before you became Prime Minister in 1983?

BH: Not specifically, no.

SO: How swiftly did you come to 'get' the Commonwealth, and decide to use it as a vehicle for Australian national interests, and specifically as a means of exerting pressure on South Africa?

BH: Well, as soon as I got in, I assumed the leadership within the Commonwealth for the fight against apartheid. I was very much assisted by Brian Mulroney, the Prime Minister of Canada, [and] Rajiv Gandhi, when he became the Prime Minister of India. And there were trade sanctions. We went to the meeting in Canada [the 1987 Vancouver CHOGM] and I said to them there that sanctions weren't working; they were just being busted. And it did seem to me that one way that we could bring the apartheid regime down would be if we did mount an effective investment sanction. So, they agreed with that, and I said, "Look, let's do something about it." So, I rang my friend Jim Wolfensohn, who was then running a private commercial bank in New York. I said, "Come up to Vancouver", and he did. I put my proposition to him. He said, "I think it could work." I said, "Will you help us?" He said, "Yes." So, I set aside senior people in our treasury and they worked with Wolfensohn and the investment sanctions were applied. And that's what brought the regime down. The last South African Finance Minister, Barend du Plessis, went on record as saying that it was the investment sanctions that put the final nail in the coffin of apartheid.

SO: At that Vancouver Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 1987, how much support did you try to corral from other heads before you contacted Jim Wolfensohn?

BH: Well, they were all on side except for Margaret [Thatcher].

SO: How far did you manage to keep this secret? Because the South African Government, after all, had its intelligence networks and links…

BH: Well, once I had the idea and got it initiated, that was then for Wolfensohn and the people that I had appointed in there to handle that. I had no part in it.

SO: They were the ones who managed to come up with the exact criteria for investment sanctions?

BH: The Commonwealth commissioned them to go ahead and try and implement an effective investment sanction. They worked on it, and they did it.

SO: What were your other inter-governmental relations like with Margaret Thatcher?

BH: It was a remarkable relationship. Margaret and I had a love/hate relationship. She was always defending the South African regime and we had some terrible fights, including an enormous one in Canada. But to her great credit, she never allowed that to get in the way of our relations. In fact, soon after that, I was going on an official visit to the UK and she instructed every minister to clear the decks of any outstanding matters between us – Australia and the Brits. And she went out of her way to make sure that that was as successful a visit as it possibly could be. So, I respected her enormously. She had great integrity in that respect.

SO: You'd had an earlier set-to with her after the Eminent Persons Group of 1986 presented their report at the London mini-Commonwealth summit meeting.

BH: Yes.

SO: Was she genuinely impervious to argument, or was it that she felt she wasn't persuaded by the argument presented?

BH: Genuinely impervious, because the funny thing there was with her Foreign Minister, Geoffrey Howe. Geoffrey and I were mates, and he disagreed with her position. So, we cooperated surreptitiously.

SO: In what way?

BH: He didn't make problems.

SO: Ah, so, he was 'the quiet voice of reason'?

BH: Yeah.

SO: The Eminent Persons Group had come out of the 1985 Nassau Heads of Government meeting…

BH: Yeah, I nominated Fraser for that. They went over there and came back, and reported to a special meeting in London.

SO: So, had you had this idea of an Eminent Persons Group or contact group before you went to the Nassau heads meeting?

BH: Well, I don't know that I'd had it particularly, but I liked the idea. I went along with it, and wanted to appoint a significant figure in Malcolm Fraser. I didn't have high hopes that they'd be able to do anything, but something was worth a try.

SO: Did Fraser stay in touch with you throughout that six-month period or…?

BH: Yeah, reasonably so.

SO: How far did you feel the EPG was a compromise that was needed, before you started pushing for further sanctions?

BH: Well, I wouldn't say it was a compromise. It was another attempt to try and do something, and I was quite happy to go along with it. But, no, I wasn't overly

optimistic, and the more I thought about it, the more I came to the conclusion about the investment sanction.

SO: When I interviewed Pik Botha, his argument was that he felt that, although the EPG was a failure by May 1986 – because of the SADF parallel bombings of neighbouring Commonwealth capitals – in the longer term it was in fact beneficial to South Africa, in terms of contributing the Possible Negotiating Concept. It gave the National Party and the ANC a platform on which they could negotiate after February 1990.

BH: Well, that's a view!

SO: I'm suggesting that, sometimes, you can look at something as a failure in the short term, but then in the long term…?

BH: I'm not saying it was a failure. I mean, I didn't have high expectations.

SO: What was your relationship like with Rajiv Gandhi?

BH: We were great mates: very, very, very close friends. In fact, on my visit to India as Prime Minister, we were going to his home for dinner. There were two aspects I remember: one is him saying how he had trouble with his security people, because they insisted he wears a vest. He said it was very uncomfortable and he often took it off, but of course, in the end, it wouldn't have mattered if he'd been wearing three vests – he would have been gone. Then, he was very reflective and rueful and regretful about the fact that his children's education…He wanted them to get educated outside of India, but he said to me the only place that he found where they would be safe was in Russia, and he didn't really want them to be educated there! So, I said, "Well, send them to Australia. I'll look after them." And my security bloke went absolutely bloody bananas, and I said, "We'll look after them." But, in the end, he didn't send them. I believe he had a real sense that he would be assassinated.

SO: Well, his mother had been assassinated in 1984.

BH: He was such an infinitely more attractive leader than his mother.

SO: Do you think the fact you had a very close friendship with him was beneficial in terms of Australian-Indian international relations?

BH: Yeah.

SO: Do you feel that's a necessary part of international relations? Good chemistry and good contacts with other heads of state?

BH: Of course. If you've got good chemistry at the top, it's an enormous help. It's easy to have good chemistry with some, not so easy with others. With Mugabe, for example.

SO: What was your relationship like with him?

BH: I hated him. He's one of the worst human beings I've ever met. He treated black and white with equal contempt. He was a horrible human being.

SO: It's been said that, in the very early period after Zimbabwe got independence, in February/March of 1980, Mugabe embarked upon reconciliation and upon nation-building. He concentrated on education, social welfare, [and] healthcare delivery. So, how far do you think it is true that the Mugabe of the 1980s can't be compared to the Mugabe of the late 1990s?

BH: Well, I don't accept this picture that's been painted of the initial, saintly-like figure that you've just projected.

SO: It's a view!

BH: Well, it may be a view. It's not mine.

SO: Were you aware of the violence within Zimbabwe from 1982 to 1987?

BH: Yeah.

SO: I'm pretty struck that Sonny Ramphal, the Secretary General of the time, and the British Government didn't make any public comment about this whatsoever.

What were your relations like with Dr Mahathir, who has been described as the other pillar of the Commonwealth [during] the late 1980s?

BH: I don't know who described Mahathir as a pillar of the Commonwealth, but they don't know what they're talking about.

SO: You wouldn't say that's an appropriate description?

BH: Well, I don't know who said it, but it's just inaccurate, is what I'm saying.

SO: It was one of my interviewees who commented that Robert Mugabe and Dr Mahathir came to be pillars of the Commonwealth for the Secretary General by the late 1980s and in the 1990s.

BH: No, that's nonsense.

SO: So, during your time as Prime Minister, would you say that there were particularly active Commonwealth leaders who were important in using the Commonwealth as a vehicle for policy? Pushing the association forward? Or, in fact, is that a misrepresentation?

BH: Brian Mulroney, myself, [and] Rajiv Gandhi; I think that was the real core. That was the engine room, I reckon.

SO: How about the Commonwealth and development in the 1980s? Obviously, there was the drive towards ending the apartheid regime, as you've identified, through the push towards trade sanctions, financial sanctions, and sport sanctions. Opposition to apartheid has been described as 'the grand strategy' of the Commonwealth. Did the Commonwealth have any other grand strategy?

BH: The concept there was that the small number of developed countries within the Commonwealth should provide assistance. This was not just financial but personal, providing experts and so on, to assist less developed members of the Commonwealth to get on the growing path. And that was part of what we did with South Africa. I said to my people, "We're knocking apartheid off but we've got to be prepared to assist them." And I sent senior people over there to assist the incoming South African regime to go about the economic plan.

SO: Was that a bilateral Australian approach?

BH: That was bilateral; that was what I did. What others did, I'm not sure.

SO: What was your relationship like with Sonny Ramphal as Secretary General?

BH: We had a very good relationship. Very good. I liked him. I thought he was a genuine man.

SO: A 'necessary political activist' for the Commonwealth?

BH: He was necessary, yeah. Well, that was part of his job, and he did it well.

SO: His successor, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, has been described as more of a diplomat – an international civil servant.

BH: Well, I can't speak with authority about him. I just didn't know him that well.

SO: I'd just like to put the Commonwealth in context, please, during your time as Prime Minister. How important was this dimension to Australian foreign policy? Or was it relatively insignificant compared to the strategic relationship with the United States at that time?

BH: They just came in different categories. You've got to remember the Cold War was a very real thing then, so the relationship with the United States was very, very important. As was the relationship that I was developing with China: that was something I did very much. And they weren't conflicting things. In fact, I was used on a number of occasions by the United States and China as a conduit. For instance, I was up there talking with the Chinese leadership and they said to me that they were a bit concerned that the Americans had a misunderstanding about their relationship with the Soviets. There was some suggestion that there was a rapprochement developing between China and the Soviets, but nothing could have been further from the truth. They wanted me to convey that message and explain it all to the United States leadership – to the President – which I did. And they were very grateful for it.

SO: How complicating for Australian foreign policy was David Lange's push for a de-nuclearized Pacific in the 1980s?

BH: No, no, you've got it quite wrong there. It wasn't his push. It was very much an Australian/New Zealand initiative to have a nuclear free South Pacific. And the Americans were very apprehensive about this. So, I explained to them that, as far as I was concerned, this didn't involve any diminution in our commitment to the ANZUS relationship. But David Lange took it further and he barred visits of US nuclear warships to New Zealand. I told him he was

crazy, because you can't have an alliance relationship if you refuse access to their ships. And the Americans wanted to punish him very severely and I intervened there and softened them somewhat. They wanted to really take some tough, reactive measures to New Zealand.

SO: What were they proposing, do you remember?

BH: Trade sanctions and all sorts of things. I said, "Well, that would be counterproductive." And so, we kept a sort of link for New Zealand with the whole thing in a situation where there was this absolute standoff between them directly.

SO: Indira Gandhi had proposed much the same thing for the Indian Ocean at the Delhi CHOGM in 1983: that there should be another nuclear free zone.

BH: Yeah. I had no time for Indira Gandhi. She was too much in the Russian camp for my liking.

SO: So, was the Commonwealth very much affected by the Cold War then?

BH: It was Indira Gandhi who very much lined up with the Russians. And she was, you know, within the Commonwealth, basically one out on that. The first meeting in 1983 was held in India and I was very off put by her. I just couldn't abide her, basically.

SO: What about Pierre Trudeau, because I know…

BH: He was before my time.

SO: Well, he was at that Delhi Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. I know that he went from there up to Moscow to argue for a kick start in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty [START I].

BH: Trudeau was at the meeting in India? Was he? Are you sure of that?

SO: Positive.

BH: Oh, well, I'd forgotten that. I really had very little to do with him. He was off the scene very soon after that.

SO: Yes, he was. Brian Mulroney came in in 1984, with Joe Clark as his Foreign Minister.

BH: I had a very close relationship with Mulroney. For example, when George Bush Senior [George HW Bush] was getting his alliance together to go into Iraq – to kick the Iraqis out of Kuwait – he rang me up. I was very close to George Bush Senior; I got to know him well as Vice President to Ronald Reagan. And George rang me up and said, "Oh, Bob," he said, "I'm having trouble with Brian." He said, "He's got a big wheat trade with Iraq, and he doesn't want to upset that." I said, "You leave it with me." So, I rang Brian up. I said, "What's this bloody nonsense. You've got a wheat trade with Iraq and you won't come aboard?" I said, "We've got a bloody big wheat trade too, so get your priorities right." And he said, "Okay, Bob. I'll come." I rang George and he was very appreciative.

SO: Australia's contribution to the first Iraq war was much less controversial than the second Gulf war.

BH: No, don't talk about the second one. That's two completely different exercises. The first one [was] totally justified, the second one not only unjustified but counterproductive.

SO: How did John Howard get that through?

BH: Well, he led the Government. They had the numbers, and just basically automatically went along with the Americans. I wrote a letter to our Australian newspaper about three weeks before the invasion and I said, "Osama bin Laden must be on his knees morning and night praying to Allah that the Americans will invade." And, of course, he was, because nothing more advanced his cause – the cause of terrorism – than the invasion of Iraq. It was an absurdity.

SO: I think so, too. I was on a Stop the War march myself in London. I could not believe the way that the politics was manipulated in London.

BH: The politics, and the religious impetus. George Bush Junior [George W Bush] was a religious fanatic, and Tony Blair wasn't far behind in a way. It was the new crusade.

SO: Indeed, another conviction politician. To go back to your time as Prime Minister, how much did you try and use the Commonwealth as a particular platform for Australia? Or was it a case that it was just there: it was a vehicle to be used?

BH: No, I didn't try and use it as a platform. It had things that it could do and which I thought were worthwhile: one would be South Africa, of course. And, as I said, I assumed a leadership role within the Commonwealth on that. But, you know, apart from that… One other thing: at the meeting in Canada, [there was] the coup in Fiji. This comes to an important part of the Commonwealth: the role of the Queen. I had absolutely just enormous respect for her as leader of the Commonwealth. You could talk to her about any of the fifty-one countries of the Commonwealth and you could have an intelligent conversation with her about the economics, the politics. She really immersed herself in the Commonwealth. And one of the features of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings was [that] she would have a meeting with each of them. You'd have an allotted time. So, my time was allotted and I went there. Before I went in, I saw the private secretary, Bill Heseltine. He had been at university with me, at the University of Western Australia. I knew him well, and I told him that I thought the way the Commonwealth meeting seemed to be scheduled to go about Fiji was very weak. It recognised the fact that the Queens' representative had been thrown out. And he said, "Will you talk to her about it?" And I said, "I will". So, I went in and she said, "I hope the timing of our meeting wasn't inconvenient for you?" I said, "Well, no, Your Majesty. I had to walk out when Margaret was speaking." She said, "Oh, I thought she'd been talking in the morning?" I said, "Your Majesty, I think you should know as well as anyone that Margaret's quite capable of talking the morning, the afternoon and the evening, if necessary." She laughed. So, I put to her directly my concern that the proposed draft was very weak and that it should be strengthened, and she said, "I agree with you." And she intervened

and talked to a lot of people and the thing was changed as a result of her intervention. So, she was, in the Commonwealth, much more than just a figurehead.

SO: Yes. Philip Murphy, the Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, has just published a book on The Queen and the Commonwealth [*Monarchy and the End of Empire*, 2013], and he has provided other instances of what you've just pointed to: of the Queen making important contributions.

BH: That's a very pertinent example I mentioned.

SO: Did you have advanced warning of what was going on in Fiji earlier that year?

BH: No.

SO: So, did Timoci Bavadra come down and talk to you after the coup?

BH: Hmm. [*Pause*]

SO: Did you play much of a part in trying to lead Fiji back into the 'councils of the Commonwealth' following its suspension?

BH: No. Only in my instructions to the diplomatic service: that there had to be a change; there couldn't just be condemnation of what had happened.

SO: Malcolm Fraser, as Prime Minister before you, had set up the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting. I know that there were CHOGRM meetings in 1979, 1981 and 1983. Fraser had also had the idea of having a Secretariat based here in Sydney, which should support the smaller states of the Pacific. What did you feel of that idea?

BH: I wasn't enamoured of it.

SO: So, if you weren't enamoured of it, is that why the idea effectively fizzled? Because it needed a Regional Head to continue to give it energy and input, and the New Zealanders were not prepared to step in and to…?

BH: No, they were not.

SO: No, okay. Why do you think the Commonwealth has survived as long as it has?

BH: Well, I think there are a number of reasons, not least of which is the personality of the Queen. It's very easy to underrate her significance. I think she finds the Commonwealth and her position as Head of the Commonwealth infinitely more interesting than being the Queen of England, because she has no significant role in the latter. She is, you know, "Do-what-you're-told, Lady". But in the Commonwealth, she is much more than just a figurehead. She has immersed herself, in the sense [that] she can speak intelligently about any and all members of the Commonwealth and she has played a role. So, there is a reciprocal respect for her, for her interest in the Commonwealth. The members of the Commonwealth recognise that here is a genuine interest

from the top. So, that's one reason. I'm not putting it necessarily in order of importance.

It [also] lives on its history, now, to some extent: its achievements in Rhodesia and South Africa, which were enormous. And they'll live on that for some time, I guess. And there is still – I'm out of touch with it now, of course – but I still think there is a degree of cooperation at the economic level, to some extent, with the more developed countries helping the less developed. How substantial that is now, I simply am not versed.

SO: I think the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation has got a budget of about $29m. It's very small indeed.

Could you identify anything else that has helped to hold it together? And what might that explain about its current viability and its future?

BH: Well, the things I've mentioned are rather substantial. I mean, the personality of the Queen… For instance, once she goes – if she's ever going to die, it seems to be questionable – if Charles were there, whether there'd be the same sort of cement is very questionable, I think. And, you know, institutions do live on their history, and it has a very substantial history of accomplishment in terms of…

SO: Of transition to black majority rule in Southern Africa? It's really very depressing, though, the extent to which that the current ANC Government seems to be faltering.

BH: Oh, don't talk to me about what's happened since Mandela! His successor was absolutely hopeless – "no such thing as AIDS" – and this present President… It's a tragedy, you know, what's happened there post-Mandela, because he was an iconic figure. Absolutely.

SO: Yes. And the Commonwealth did play a remarkable role in supporting his release.

BH: It wouldn't have happened without it. When he came out and assumed leadership, the first country he visited – outside of Africa – was Australia. He came to thank us. I was still Prime Minister. I was in my office and he walked in. He walked across, took my hand, he said, "Bob, if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here today." Now, that wasn't just Bob Hawke: I was acting for Australia; it was what Australia did. So, he understood.

SO: In addition to helping to secure his release and Australia's assistance to the process of negotiations, were you also trying to encourage trade union links at that particular point?

BH: It wasn't a big thing. I did say to our unions that they should try and do everything they could to help.

SO: Yes. So, the viability of the Commonwealth going forward… Some people say that inertia helps to explain why the Commonwealth hasn't broken up before now. It's there. It continues to exist. Do you take an active interest in what's going on in Commonwealth matters? There is a big debate about the question of leadership: whether it's got too big, whether it needs to reform its Heads of Government meetings because

they are so large now, whether, in fact, there needs to be a politician as the next Secretary General and a debate about the Headship. Will it be Prince Charles? Will the Commonwealth do away with the Head?

BH: I'm just not involved in it now. I've done my bit.

SO: Was there a Commonwealth dimension, in any way, to your relations trying to get the European Community to lower its protectionist barriers? I wondered if there was a Commonwealth bloc...

BH: No.

SO: The other question I had was about your relationship with Lee Kuan Yew and whether that was of use in Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. Was it of use to Australia reaching out to the South East Asia region?

BH: I had a good personal relationship with Lee Kuan Yew and I used him, in the sense, that he… He made a statement in 1980, and he said in that statement that, "If Australia keeps going the way it is, it will finish up the poor, white trash of Asia." And he was right, because we were just going backwards. So, I used that to wake Australia up, and it was the base of my economic summit and turned round all the Australian economy. That's how his statement was useful.

SO: A good rhetorical flag to get everybody to really focus. My last question, Sir, is about Malcolm Fraser's campaign to be Commonwealth Secretary General. Did you actively encourage him to do that?

BH: No. Well, when I say 'no'… What year was that that he tried?

SO: It would be 1988 to 1989. He tried to do it at the Kuala Lumpur meeting.

BH: Yeah, no, I did try and help. I'm sorry, I did.

SO: So, was it his idea, that you recall, and you backed it? Or was there a…

BH: I think it was his idea. It wasn't mine; I didn't initiate it.

SO: I know Gareth Evans, whom I talked to last week, was his campaign manager. Were you surprised that he didn't manage to clinch the Secretary General-ship?

BH: I mean, all the arguments there are against Malcolm – and there are many – the one thing in which he is impeccable and why I would support him in this is that he has an absolutely impeccable record on the question of colour and race. People often wondered why. What I see as a possible explanation is [that] he came from a very wealthy family – a 'squattocracy' – and he had private education at home and then he went to boarding school at Melbourne Grammar School, one of those lead schools in Australia. And then he went straight from Melbourne Grammar to Oxford. And he would have been a very lonely person, and I think he probably met a lot of black students there who were also probably lonely. I think he formed friendships with them, which established his judgement about the question of colour. That's my theory. I don't know whether it's right or not, but that's what I always respected about

Malcolm. He was absolutely, totally impeccable on the question of race and colour.

SO: So, he truly was colour blind.

BH: Yeah, absolutely.

SO: I can understand why that would be a key formative experience for him, because I can just imagine how lonely he would have been at Magdalen College, Oxford. Your experiences at Oxford would've been very different.

BH: [*Laughter*] Yeah, very much so!

SO: Sir, I think that's covered the aspects that I wanted to touch on. You've been really kind and very frank, and you've also helped to set the Commonwealth in context. I fully appreciate that the Commonwealth was not the most important aspect of Australian foreign policy, although the Commonwealth likes to consider itself to be the driving force and a global subsystem in these years. So, thank you very much indeed.

BH: My pleasure.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]