



University of London

INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Mark Robinson (Part One)

Key:

SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

MR: Mark Robinson (Respondent)

Part One:

SO: This is Sue Onslow talking to Mr Mark Robinson on Wednesday, 17th July 2013 in London. Mark, thank you very much indeed for coming in to Senate House to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by saying, please, how you were recruited to the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1977.

MR: I was recruited by the Commonwealth Secretary General. He was introduced to me by the American Under-Secretary General at the UN, Brad Morse, who had been an American Congressman and whom I had worked for as a congressional intern. I was sitting in my room in the Executive Office of the UN Secretary General when Sonny Ramphal was brought in by Brad Morse, and Brad said, "I'm going to leave you alone because Sonny's got something rather special to ask you." So, I shut the door, sat down, and he said, "I want to get Observer Status for the Commonwealth Secretariat at the UN in New York." So, we chatted for a little bit and I said, "Look, when are you next in New York?" He said in about three weeks and I said, "Right, there's no point talking about this now. I will research this and have all the answers for you in three weeks." Well, three weeks later I was summoned to Ramphal's hotel suite by Moni Malhoutra, head of Ramphal's Private Office, [who said], "The SG would like to see you." I said, "Are you staying also?" "No, no; it's very private." I went in and I told Ramphal what I had found out about – how to get UN Observer Status. He said, "How long will it take?" I said, "Normally, about ten years, Sonny." He said, "But I want to get in by September." I said, "You have a chance."

SO: Why was there such a rush, do you think?

MR: Ramphal was very anxious to get the Commonwealth greater recognition at the UN and I told him, "You've got a chance, because the PLO is being

admitted and Yasser Arafat is coming and Kurt Waldheim is almost desperate to have somebody else. So, I think we can pull this off.”

SO: How did you achieve that?

MR: The application simply had to go through the bureaucratic works of the UN. The Commonwealth Secretariat had to fill out details and everything about the Secretariat, including the work that it is doing. [With] that done, there was no hitch. ‘C’ came before ‘P’, so Sonny was introduced into the General Assembly first and Arafat second. I was sorry I couldn’t be with him because I had to be at Waldheim’s side when Arafat arrived by helicopter in the UN garden. He came backwards down the helicopter’s steps, the wind blew and he had a gun in his belt. I said to Waldheim, “Oh, dear. Press photos that are going to go all around the world” – which, of course, they did. After that, the next time Ramphal was in New York he asked to see me. He said he knew that I had political ambitions in the UK and that I wanted to come back to London. Would I come and work in his private office and get there in time for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting to be held at Lancaster House before the end of 1977? I arrived about one month before the CHOGM, having exercised my right to be repatriated by sea on the last leg of the QE2’s jubilee world cruise. This right was rescinded shortly after that, so as someone said at the time, “Some people have all the luck”!

On arrival in London, things were very awkward as my mother was ill and clearly dying. At the Secretariat, Moni didn’t appear terribly keen on having someone else around, so I was put in the East Wing with the International Affairs Division. His people management was never strong. Working with the Secretary General when you’re not around his office proved to be a real challenge, but then a few days before CHOGM, Janet Singh – Ramphal’s PA – rang me and said SG wants to see you and he told me, “You’re not to leave my side during CHOGM. There are two chairs behind me. One will be shared by the Deputy Secretary General Emeka Anyaoku and Moni. The other is yours.” He also said, “You come with me to the Retreat. I’m only allowed to take two: Janet, and the second one is you. Your job is to keep your ear to the ground. I will give you tricky political assignments.” And that’s how I came to know Jim Callaghan, as I was sitting behind the Prime Minister as well.

Just a quick forward flash... You’re not meant to make a controversial maiden speech [as a newly-elected MP to the British House of Commons]. I was called in the second emergency debate on the American invasion of Grenada in 1983, and I spoke along these lines, [that] I didn’t really believe that we were in the business of giving independence to Commonwealth countries only to take it back because we didn’t like the leader. I was heard in silence – I later learned that is the tradition when a maiden speech is given – and you could have heard a pin drop. Then, in the toilet afterwards, I found myself beside Jim Callaghan, who said, “Mark, splendid speech that. What on earth are you doing in that party?” On which a voice from an inner cubicle, Roy Jenkins, said, “Absolutely right, Jim! He should be in mine.”

SO: [Laughter] Yes. Just going back to that first CHOGM in London in 1977, it’s so often forgotten now just how much of a problem Idi Amin’s Uganda was at that particular point, with people emphasising South

Africa and Rhodesia as the great crises of the Commonwealth in the 1970s and '80s.

MR: When I was in Waldheim's office, Amin came to New York. He came with a plane full of food for his party – which, of course, was impounded by the Americans. The West decided to boycott his reception and Waldheim wanted somebody with the look of a Brit. So, I went with Waldheim to the reception, met Amin, [and] found an extraordinary man. I knew the background, of course, but talking to him was a bit like talking to a very friendly child and it was perplexing to understand how he could ever hurt anyone. This was about 1975. He got the ambassador to read his speech: it was like a brochure for the Ugandan tourist board. It went on and on and on. But in 1977, I was in Lancaster House in the run up to CHOGM. Ramphal called me over to his office and I found him sitting alone with Jim Callaghan. The Prime Minister said to me, "Mark, we've got these rumours that Amin is on his way to London, so could you please find out whether the rumours are true or not?" I said, "I will do my best," left with head spinning and thought, "I'm just going to go to the Reuters tapes and see what is there." I read the Reuters reports, reached a conclusion and decided to gamble with it. I went back in [and] said, "Prime Minister, I believe it's a spoof," and it was a spoof.

SO: It was very successful in winding up the Brits!

MR: Yes, and it was a media spoof – it wasn't an Amin spoof. Somebody had done a little bit of colourful reporting...

SO: And it had become embroidered and elaborated?

MR: It had got on the Reuters tapes and went everywhere.

SO: It acquired some momentum.

MR: I had been through all that with Waldheim. I knew about it because, after the Entebbe raid, Waldheim was reported as condemning the Israeli intervention. It was never true. What had happened was something that he had said had been translated into Arabic for the Middle East news and then retranslated back and, of course, all hell had broken loose. The American media was screaming. Once something like that goes around the world it doesn't matter how many denials you issue: you can never put the rabbit back in the hutch. So, I smelt the same sort of thing. There wasn't time to ask anybody else. FCO officials to whom I spoke were unable to shed any light on the matter.

SO: Mark, were you also being bombarded by messages from the Palace to confirm or deny this?

MR: Jim Callaghan was being bombarded by messages from the Palace. It was a crisis meeting. I was the only staff called in. I was young and operating well above my pay grade!

SO: It must have been very welcome news indeed, then, when you said, "He is not in the air."

MR: But it was just the way it read on the tapes – that Amin was in the air – which caused all the trouble. It just didn't make sense, and of course, I knew from Callaghan that the FCO had not had a single word from the High Commissioner in Kampala that Amin was on the move, which had already made them think he wasn't on the way. But on hearing my assessment, the PM killed the story stone dead and it wasn't an issue after that.

SO: So, from what you observed then the relationship between Jim Callaghan and Sonny Ramphal was particularly good?

MR: Very strong.

SO: In contrast to the representation of the tense working relationship between Sonny Ramphal and Mrs Thatcher after 1979?

MR: Well, the tense relationship was between Peter Carrington and Ramphal. Carrington just couldn't stand Ramphal and did not trust his political skills.

SO: I have done a lot of research about the Lusaka CHOGM, as well as the whole Lancaster House negotiation process. I know that Carrington was very determined that this was going to be a British show and he was equally convinced that Sonny's 'outer diplomacy' could significantly complicate things. Sonny Ramphal, on the other hand, felt that it was his responsibility to ensure the Commonwealth Secretariat provided the administrative backup for the Zimbabwe nationalist parties during the negotiations.

MR: Let me tell you how I come into this. In the run up to the 1979 elections, Francis Pym was shadow Foreign Secretary and he came to see Ramphal with Richard Luce. I was present. We sat and talked about the possibilities for finding a solution to the Zimbabwe/Rhodesia situation. At the end of it, Pym looked at Ramphal and said, "Would you mind if Mark and Richard just keep in touch with each other?" Which we did. Then, of course, Pym wasn't Foreign Secretary after the Conservatives came to power in 1979 – Carrington was – but Richard Luce kept the dialogue going. I would pop over to his office in the Foreign Office. I remember one day sitting [and] chatting privately to Richard, and I said, "Look, what you might have to think about is pulling down the Zimbabwe/Rhodesia flag and putting up the Union Jack and holding an election under our own flag." Richard thought of it and said, "You're crazy", or words to that effect.

SO: So, this is 1978, the time when...?

MR: No, this is 1979 now. Margaret Thatcher was now in office. The dialogue kept going, even although Richard Luce's boss had changed.

SO: So, once he becomes Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, after May of '79, that's when, as you say, that relationship...

MR: At his retirement party, Douglas Hurd said of me, "Now, I come to my PPS [Parliamentary Private Secretary]. The thing about Mark is he just has this knack of being around my office on a Thursday evening, so he would come in

and talk. He would have all these ideas. I would dismiss a lot of them and then come in on Monday morning and implement most of them." I think there was a bit of this in regard to my Rhodesia conversations with Richard Luce. Richard obviously went away and thought about it and it could be that there were other people in the Foreign Office thinking along similar lines. Whatever [it was], such conversations can always be useful.

SO: Talking of being useful, if I can just take you back to that first London CHOGM. You said that you accompanied Sonny Ramphal to the retreat at Gleneagles. What did you observe of the value of the retreat in terms of the diplomacy of the Commonwealth? How did it contribute to personal chemistry between heads of states?

MR: It was enormous in those days and we couldn't have got the Gleneagles Agreement on apartheid and sport without it. Ramphal came to Gleneagles with the draft [Agreement] in his pocket. If Margaret Thatcher had known of my role regarding the Gleneagles Agreement, she probably would never have made me a minister, but it was done before her time! [Laughter]

SO: Probably not! So, why did you draft it? Where did those ideas come from, what were you drawing on?

MR: It was drafted entirely in private. It was agreed [that] something had to be done about apartheid and sport. Ramphal had been sitting with people like John Syson and Roland Brown. There was a group of about nine, from what I recall. All would sit around Ramphal's table, discussing the upcoming CHOGM. So, when I got to Gleneagles I had that draft and I was instructed by Ramphal to give it to every head of government personally. Most interesting, I got stuck in a lift with Robert Muldoon, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, and I said, "Oh, by the way, I've got a bit of paper here which the Secretary General has asked me to give you personally." "What is it?" he said. I said, "It's a draft of something called the Gleneagles agreement on apartheid and sport." "Give it to me." He didn't look at it but folded it up and put it in his pocket. He said, "I think it will be better if I never read this because I will probably have to agree to it." [Laughter] Which he did! Of course, it was the Callaghan era, so Ramphal would have cleared it with the Foreign Office. Who was the Foreign Secretary?

SO: In 1977? It was David Owen. He took over from Anthony Crosland, who had died in February [of that year].

MR: That's right. But I don't remember David Owen ever being part of an inner diplomacy at CHOGM. But he might have been. He wasn't in Gleneagles, of course. In those days, foreign ministers didn't go to CHOGM. The other person involved was... On the Sunday morning, I arrived at Lee Kuan Yew's door and I said, "I've been asked by the Secretary General to give you a copy of the draft Gleneagles agreement on apartheid and sport." He said, "I don't do anything on a Sunday morning. Just put it on my desk." He saw my hesitance and he said, "What you've got to understand about me is nobody ever dares read anything that is on my desk." So, I just put it on his desk. [Laughter] In the end, it all went through *nem con*, after there was a private discussion. All sorts of things could happen at a retreat. We even heard that someone was trying to penetrate the perimeter without identification. Anyway,

we were having a meeting – as one does at CHOGMs – about nothing very much, if you know what I mean, such as, “How is the dinner going to run?”, blah, blah, all that sort of stuff. And suddenly, this harassed official burst in and said to John Henning, Head of the UK Conference Unit, saying, “We’ve got a break in.” Henning said, “What kind of break in?” and the reply was, “Well, there’s a man in slacks and a sweater with no identification, claiming to be the Prime Minister of Canada,” to which Henning replied, “For God’s sake, let Pierre Trudeau back in!” [Laughter] Imagine that happening today! And then Janet Singh and I were escorting the Secretary General down to the banquet. We were three quarters of the way down the stairs when a cupboard door opened and there was Trudeau with a rose, handing it to Janet: “For my favourite lady.” [Laughter] So, you never knew what would happen next!

SO: A colourful politician and a brilliant maverick!

MR: Colourful, colourful. I had met Trudeau in Ramphal’s suite in New York before I joined the Secretariat. I may have arrived on the scene as a complete amateur, but I knew how to deal with people at the highest levels. The Foreign Office hadn’t a clue where I had come from, because it’s most unusual for somebody from the UK to suddenly pop up in the UN Secretary General’s offices.

SO: And you hadn’t been on their radar at all?

MR: I wasn’t on their radar at all, and of course to start with I wasn’t on the British quota. I was actually on a six month contract which could be renewed five times, up till 11 months.

SO: Mark, I have several questions coming out of what you’ve said so far. The first of which concerns the diplomacy of getting the Gleneagles Agreement [approved]. Was there much private resistance? Or was this something that was felt, by Commonwealth consensus, to be an effective lever to demonstrate opposition to apartheid?

MR: I think the Brits in the Callaghan era thought it was a very useful lever. It was a completely different attitude, and there was no problem with Malcolm Fraser. The one we all worried about was Robert Muldoon.

SO: Because of the All Blacks?

MR: Yes. Also, there was awkwardness that I hit when I was a Welsh sports minister in Wales, because there was no way of knowing how sports people would react, but in those days it was unlikely to be positive.

SO: Indeed.

MR: So, in terms of the diplomacy of achieving that agreement, there was extraordinary consensus, and the private diplomacy at the retreat was critical in ensuring this. The same can be said about the discussion on whether there should be a Commonwealth statement about respect for human rights. I know that Sonny Ramphal felt that there was a degree of inconsistency with opposition to apartheid and yet the Commonwealth was remarkably silent on human rights abuses in Uganda. Ramphal always had lots of subsidiary ideas

– some of which would fly, some of which wouldn't fly. He was always very open in discussing, but never under-estimate the chair of a CHOGM, as that head of government has much more influence than they normally have when not in such a position, with the occasional exception such as Margaret Thatcher. The Brits were high on the influence factor in 1977. But then, in 1979, I was in Kaunda's study when the group of ten met with Mark Chona, President Kaunda's Personal Assistant. Margaret Thatcher obviously liked what we were doing because they would talk and then the draft would come back and we would turn it into something and send it back. She said, "I think those two young men next door need a bit of help. Do you mind if I send someone to help them?" And Ramphal and Kaunda looked at each other and said, "If you wish." So, that's the first time I met Sir Antony Duff and do you know what he said? He said, "You two are doing a splendid job. I'm just going to sit and listen."

SO: I have to say, having interviewed the surviving members of Carrington's team around Lancaster House, I have acquired an extraordinary respect for Tony Duff as a highly effective political operator who was remarkably tough, intelligent, and astute.

MR: You see, although Moni Malhoutra was head of the Commonwealth Observer group, as I said, I had my own remit and so I got to know members of Soames' team. When Ramphal came out to Salisbury just after Mugabe had won the election, he and I went to see the Governor and we were met by Soames and Tony Duff. The view of the NGOs during the election was that Tony Duff was the man who was likely to determine whether Mugabe and ZANU-PF should be proscribed or not.

SO: Really?

MR: He was seen as the hard man; he was the danger man. So, I was slightly surprised when Tony Duff walked with me behind Soames and Ramphal and said, "Mark, I think we've got the best possible result, don't you?" But there were so many different views in and around Government House. Robert Jackson, the former Tory MP, was Soames' special advisor and we had known each other from Oxford. I went out to dinner with him one night after I had been in Gwelo with one of the younger Australian Observers and we ran into Edson Zvobgo, the star of stage and screen, at Lancaster House. Because Bill Bowtell, assistant to the Australian Commonwealth Observer, had taken him all around Australian universities as a student leader, Bill knew how to share a drink with him. By the time he had consumed a second bottle of whisky, I was saying, "Now, Edson, tell me, what's going to happen in the election in terms of seats?" And he looked at me and [started to say something], but I stopped him and said, "No, no; I don't want all that bullshit." I asked him three times and he turned to me finally and said, "All right, you bastard, I'll tell you." He told me exactly what ZANU were doing, [and] exactly how many seats Nkomo would win. I said, "What about Gwelo?" And he said, "Joshua will get eight; we'll get four." I said, "What about the Bishop?" And he said, "How many are we left with? Three or four, I suppose." In fact, it was three in the final result. So, I told Robert this and I said, "I actually think this could be an accurate result." He said, "Look, for God's sake, don't mention that to anyone anywhere near Government House because if it goes back to Number 10, she'll go mad."

SO: I've heard Carrington say there was a sweepstake in the Foreign Office at that particular time on who was likely to win. The most junior person responsible for Europe was the one who got it right, and Carrington said, "Bloody typical. The person who knows absolutely nothing about it!"

MR: Well, I got it right. It was fed back to Ramphal, of course, because he was the man I was reporting to.

SO: After the Lusaka CHOGM where you witnessed the personal diplomacy in Kaunda's study and where the decision for the all-party conference under British chairmanship in London was made, what was your brief during the Lancaster House negotiations?

MR: What happened, as you probably know, was that in the evenings the Commonwealth High Commissioners would meet in Marlborough House to discuss what had transpired in Lancaster House that day. So, I was sitting behind Ramphal through all of that and there were scare stories coming up all the time, [that] it was about to break down over x, y or z. Reports were also coming from Carrington's office that Ramphal was messing the whole thing up. But there was so much of that and we got used to it.

SO: What about the land deal?

MR: No, I wasn't involved with that. It was a bit of a sacred thing, which is why it got into the trouble that it did.

SO: So, who was in the inner circle that dealt with the Lancaster House talks?

MR: It was mainly the Brits. We at the Secretariat were not allowed to be involved in that, although we were very much involved outside Lancaster House. Ramphal and Emeka Anyaoku, then-Deputy Secretary General, worked hard on that.

The Lusaka agreement was that there should be a Lancaster House conference. After that, when Mugabe, Nkomo, Bishop Muzorewa and Ndabaningi Sithole were all in London, the Foreign Office were all trying to keep Ramphal as far away as possible and weren't terribly keen for him to get out of Marlborough House. Of course, we were being fed back information all the time through Commonwealth High Commissioners [and] African Ambassadors, along with the key Zimbabwe political leaders, bearing in mind they had conflicting views.

SO: And you maintained your close relationship with Richard Luce?

MR: Not really at that time. There wasn't time to do that. Events had moved to a completely different pace. There was no time for that kind of dialogue.

SO: So, how important do you feel Ramphal was in helping to prevent the breakdown of negotiations at Lancaster House?

MR: I think he was very important because he built up very close relationships with Mugabe, Nkomo and – to a limited extent – with Muzorewa and Sithole, both of whom could cause unnecessary trouble if not handled with care.

SO: So, that question of personal trust, that vital element of diplomacy...

MR: And also in key diplomatic African missions – for instance, Ramphal was very close to Mwalimu [Julius Nyerere] and Kaunda. I drove Joan Wicken, Nyrere's assistant, back from the Conservative Party Conference. I had made a speech at that conference defending Carrington. After I'd finished speaking, some lunatic got up and accused Margaret Thatcher of having blood on her dress for dancing with Kenneth Kaunda in Lusaka. We had thought we were going to lose the vote in that conference, something unheard of, but Robert Rhodes James started a slow hand clap that spread across the Blackpool Conference Hall just as the lunatic was attacking Maggie, so, we carried the day without a vote.

SO: It was at that conference that there were banners reading 'Hang Carrington'.

MR: Yes, I believe so.

SO: Julian Amery and his group.

MR: Yes, and I had to speak in that atmosphere. But the moment Robert started to slow hand clap that was it. We won the day. I had never made a speech to an audience like that but I am also my strongest when I know what I am talking about. But in politics, you often have to speak without really knowing what you are talking about and I hated that.

SO: You did, as a politician! Operating 'on the fly', as it were. Ramphal presents himself as being of critical importance in helping to bring the Americans on side to contribute to the land deal. Were you aware in any way of that?

MR: I was aware. I wasn't involved, but I was aware those things were going on, yes. And it was awfully sensitive, because the Brits were happy to see some kind of a deal, but they didn't want the white Rhodesians going mad.

SO: They wanted to keep the white Rhodesian skills in the country. They didn't want financial or human capital flight.

MR: Yes. My step brother, Robin Bailey, moved there after the cease fire and still lives there. He knew all Soames' people, as well as all the military people. He got me in with the monitoring force; he got me in everywhere.

SO: So, you were sent out by Ramphal with this specific political brief?

MR: Yes, [but] never in writing.

SO: Wise. So, when did you arrive there? In December of '79?

MR: No, I arrived three days after the ceasefire came into effect in early January 1980 and stayed right through. I stayed on to the independence ceremony. The first day I was there, I went with Peter Snelson to the northeast by plane to look at the route of a mobile polling station. When we got there, the airport hut was heavily sandbagged. On return, the District Commissioner said, "I didn't want to tell you this, but that is the first time in eighteen months any white people have been down that route, and it's the first time we haven't been shot at." But my mother, being South African, had always told me about the Bush telegraph. They knew why we were there.

SO: So, you were part of the Commonwealth observer mission?

MR: I was part of the executive group that ran the Commonwealth election observer mission, which included people like Derek Ingram. There were ten of us, I think. You have probably got the list somewhere.

SO: I do. It was under the chairmanship of the Indian diplomat, Mr Rajeshwar Dayal, who had overseen the United Nations force going in to Congo.

MR: Peter Snelson was part of the team. It was the first time I had met Derek and now Derek is a very old friend. He was our press spokesman. But I would be in places that other parts never reach, which was how I found myself at a reception given by the Governor which was hardly a diversified reception. I said to somebody, "Who's that little man over there?" He said, "Oh, that's General Walls." I think I may have had one too many, so I marched up to him [and said], "General Walls, very nice to meet you. I'm Mark Robinson, Commonwealth observer group. Can I ask you a question?" He said, "By all means." "Why won't you meet with the Commonwealth Observer group?" He said, "I never knew they wanted to meet with me." I said, "Well, Chairman Dayal would very much like to meet with you." "Look," he said. "Take this card. This is my PA. Call her first thing Monday morning." He met Dayal and the observer group on the Wednesday. Dayal said, "Have you met all the leaders?" Walls said, "Yes, everyone except Mugabe." He said, "Well, why on earth haven't you met Mugabe?" "I don't know; how do I get hold of him? Does he have a telephone number out there in the bush?" He met Mugabe that Friday and at that meeting he offered Walls – "when I am elected" – to continue his role as Commander of the Armed Forces, at least in the interim. It was one-to-one and you could argue that that was the most influential moment in the sense that it put the kibosh on any possible coup from that source.

SO: I was going to ask you about this question of coups.

MR: The coups. Many coups. Some true; some not. There was a march on the Saturday: all sorts of military people coming through Salisbury.

Some days before the election, I was at a dinner party and I was chatting to the hostess and she suddenly yelled out [to her husband], "This man thinks Mugabe's going to win the election. Darling, you must put my jewels in the bank." "You bloody stupid woman," he said. "He'll nationalise the banks. I wouldn't do that if I was you." Then he said to me, "You guys think you're awfully clever, don't you, coming here and sorting all this out." He said, "Look around this table. Look at all the beautiful women. Where are their

boyfriends?" He said, "They're dead. [They have] been killed in the bush. You're here for one reason and one reason only. We are sick and tired of losing our young and we want this brought to an end." Ramphal found such information very useful. I would phone him, but I never shared it with any of my colleagues. The Commonwealth Secretariat can be the most leaky place.

SO: Can I ask you about the Commonwealth Secretariat as an international organisation? You'd come from the UNO. How did it compare?

MR: I use this in speeches. The Commonwealth runs on a budget, I used to say, that wouldn't pay for car parking at the UN. But the one that's used now is that the total Commonwealth budget is less than the budget for the UN cafeteria. It's tiny; it's peanuts. And it's the best value for money you can find, and funding governments are still chipping away at it.

SO: So, coming, as you say, from *the* international organisation to the bureaucracy for a global subsystem, did it seem like a very small pond? I'm just trying to situate the Secretariat as representative of the broader Commonwealth...

MR: I didn't think about that very much, simply because I was allowed to use my political brain. Ramphal allowed me to think and extrapolate as he did with all his key staff. At the UN, Namibia crossed my path as well. One of my final tasks in the UN was to read through the final draft of the UNTAG Namibia plan for the SG. I said then it wouldn't surprise me if Zimbabwe didn't get independence before Namibia, which turned out to be true. In the Commonwealth Secretariat, we were doing distance learning courses for Namibians and all sorts of related things.

SO: As far as the Commonwealth's diplomatic activities were concerned, the Namibia issue was much more of a slow burn?

MR: Very, very slow burn, because it was so big in the UN and it was the province of the trusteeship council.

SO: So, was the Secretariat trying to stay in touch with the Contact Group?

MR: Yes, it would, and Ramphal knew Martti Ahtisaari from Finland very well. The thing about Ramphal was that he seemed to know anyone who mattered well.

SO: Yes, an excellent networker.

MR: Yes.

SO: Using that policy space to excellent effect. So, by March 1980, finally Zimbabwe had made the successful transition to internationally-recognised independence. Had the Secretariat been in contact with Governor Soames, who came back and argued for a lot more money from the British government?

MR: We were encouraging him to. Ramphal and Soames seemed to get on quite well. I remember Soames coming to a reception at the Jameson Hotel for the observers and I walked out with him and I said, "Don't get over worried about

the observers. The way things are going I think you could get a very good report on this election.” And he said, “I bloody hope you’re right.” But he said, “I am nervous.” He was nervous. What did he get? An extremely good report. I was involved in the drafting, as were many of my colleagues.

SO: Derek Ingram said that there had been a crisis just at the point when – of course, it was a three-day poll – when some excitable journalist came hurrying in and said Coca-Cola washed the ink stamp off people’s fingers. Can you fill me in on that?

MR: Journalists came in and said many things. It wasn’t, I believe, true.

SO: No, it wasn’t, but Derek did say that he went haring out to buy some Coca-Cola to test this, as otherwise the election would be nullified! [Laughter]

MR: To test it, yes; he would do. Indeed, I know he did so. It’s been heard in many other elections since: “some secret substance.” But then I have been an election observer on several occasions. I was out in the field on the last day, with two Nigerian observers in a private plane, and we were just dropping into polling stations – landing in the field and walking over. I remember being greeted by the British bobby, who looked splendid in his helmet miles out in the bush. “Excuse me, sir, I wonder if you could tell me which of these wallahs is allowed into the polling station and which aren’t.” So I said, “You see these two rather larger Nigerian gentlemen? They’re allowed in, but I’m not.” He said, “Oh, well, would you mind terribly coming in as well?” I said, “If you say so.” But you see, observers are observers – [they’re] not allowed to meddle. We got into one polling station and found that just through incompetence ballot boxes hadn’t been sealed properly. So we just quietly pointed that out to the local Zimbabwe officers. They said, “Could you help me do it?” I said, “If nobody’s looking, yeah, we will help. If it helps you, just do it and don’t talk about it afterwards.” Quite a lot of that went on in the first South African elections which I also observed.

SO: Yes, I’m sure.

MR: I remember seeing an old man who had walked three days to vote and he arrived one minute after the polls closed. Not being allowed to vote, he just shrugged his shoulders and started to walk back. One had to be terribly careful that you did not interfere. Every situation is different. It is not like the situation in Uganda where the rules said anyone who is in the queue at nine o’clock could vote. At that time, an official was sent to the end of the queue and anyone in front of that person could vote. Which reminds me, I forget which British election it was, where people in the queue at 10pm were not allowed to vote...?

SO: Oh, it was the last one in 2010.

MR: It was ridiculous.

SO: It was. It was nonsensical. I remember turning up to vote and just declaring that this is where I live, and they took no ID whatsoever.

MR: But the people we had on our side [in Zimbabwe] were John Boynton's polling officials, including a wonderful man called John Cumber. He was Save the Children deputy head. He used to draw these marvellous cartoons. Most had colonial experience and were absolutely on side with what the Commonwealth observers were trying to achieve. Government House, to start with, was horrified that we were insisting on setting up locally-based observer stations in the regions. There were strong arguments with Government House, but we insisted that the Commonwealth observer mission was not [composed of] people going out on little tourist packages to places like Victoria Falls and seeing if all is well. In the end, the Commonwealth observer group got everything it wanted, which was vital in securing local confidence.

SO: In terms of getting everything you wanted, do you remember what your views were of South African activities? The presence of South African troops in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe at that particular time was very contentious, and there was the question of South African funding for the Muzorewa election campaign.

MR: There was all that, but we didn't really have to get involved. There was nothing we could do; there just was not time. What mattered was that we did well what we had been asked to do. In addition, much of what you heard was just rubbish, while the rest had a grain of truth in it. The sort of thing I found myself doing – and this is one example – was going right into the bush one day because some military commander had a whole lot of 'ters', as they called them [Rhodesian slang for 'terrorist'], in pens in breach of the ceasefire. We went to see for ourselves. The first car was ZANU-PF, then came the monitoring force vehicle with [other] key soldiers with me. So, we were in a Land Rover and [there were] two other vehicles, I think. We arrive in this camp in the middle of nowhere and the local officer in charge says, "Are you guys mad? These roads are mined. You come in a car: you must be crazy!" And I said, "ZANU-PF have come in a car in front of us because they know where the mines are. Now, we understand you are still holding some people." "Yeah, well, the ceasefire doesn't work. I know that." In essence, this local commander had gone maverick, and there were these guys in these cages – literally, in cages. Well, after a bit of chat and a drink – I think it was tea – he let them all go and they all rushed off to the nearest assembly point. They knew where it was. So, when we got back, of course, news of that success had spread. Bush telegraph. So, I never knew from one day to the next what I might be doing and then I would come back and have to catch up on the political developments. We were obsessed, in a way, with the threat of Mugabe being proscribed. It was a really serious threat and the reason it didn't happen was because Soames spent a lot of time with his senior military officials, including Andrew Parker Bowles and people like that. He had thrown nice dinner parties for the military boys and he would hear from them. They made it quite clear and said, "If you proscribe Mugabe, our people will be taken hostage. They're all armed in those camps and we haven't made them give up their guns." I saw them in those assembly points and it was like something from a spaghetti western film, with the 'ters' covered in straps of ammunition, Kalashnikovs and the like.

SO: As Soames said, "It was a wild thing, an African election."

MR: In Zimbabwe it was a wild thing. It was a really wild thing. There were young white men in the Monomotapa Hotel at night playing Russian roulette. Horrific things going on. The day I left, after the independence ceremony, I sat back on the plane and the announcer said, "Comrade President, ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard this flight." Half the whites in the back were trying to get off the plane! [*Laughter*] I found myself doing a bit of, "Calm down, calm down. It's perfectly all right. He is your Prime Minister now!"

SO: A success, then; an unlikely success, but a success. How much did that innovative exercise in Commonwealth election observing roll directly into the Ugandan exercise?

MR: Oh, this was the first. I was involved in the second Uganda exercise, not the first. I was in Arusha, Tanzania, organising a Commonwealth Health Ministers meeting, and Ramphal called and [asked if I] could go straight to Kampala. I said, "I've only come here for five days; I've hardly got any clothes. I would have to come back to London." So, when I got back to London, he said, "I've had a much better idea. You're going to be my man in London for this exercise and I'm sending Chris Laidlaw to Kampala." It was a horrific mission. If I had gone to Kampala, I wouldn't have been allowed on the second observer exercise, even though it was years later. But what I will tell you is that the system we set up in the first ever Commonwealth election observer mission has lasted. Chief Emeka Anyaoku, when Commonwealth Secretary General, slightly air-brushed this: you could be left to think he started it all. But they followed the Zimbabwe format in every single Commonwealth observer group held since – adapted, of course, to fit the individual circumstances of each mission.

SO: So, those first Rhodesia/Zimbabwe elections served as the pilot study. Then Uganda, and then there was...

MR: It was the same principles applied in Uganda but it was more hiding under the table. I heard shots being fired down the other end of my telephone. I was talking to Moni, who was hiding under a table, but Moni said, "Don't worry too much. I think we are quite safe, they're just celebrating the result." Which turned out to be true.

SO: Mark, thank you very much indeed.

[END OF AUDIOFILE PART ONE]