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Key:

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SO: Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Amitav Banerji, lately the Head of Political Affairs Division at the Commonwealth Secretariat, on Monday, 21st September 2015. Amitav, thank you very much indeed for coming to Senate House to take part in this oral history of the modern Commonwealth project. I wonder if you could begin, please, by saying, when you came to the Secretariat at the start of the 1990s from the Indian diplomatic service, what were your attitudes towards the Commonwealth? Also, what were the attitudes of your foreign service?

AB: Well, firstly, I should say thank you very much for inviting me to this. It's a pleasure to be with you. I joined at a very interesting time, Sue. I joined in 1990, when the Cold War was deemed to have been over and apartheid was beginning to crumble in South Africa. That was a very, very interesting juncture in global affairs when I came. I was nominated by my government as a candidate. I came as a secondee when I was pleasantly surprised in getting the job and I think, at that point, I certainly interpreted that as the Government of India taking an interest in the Commonwealth in that it encouraged me to apply for the job in the Political Affairs Division, or the International Affairs Division as it was then called. I think my government's attitude towards the Commonwealth has probably varied. I like to say that without Jawaharlal

Nehru, there would not have been a modern Commonwealth. Perhaps, had he not studied at Harrow, and at Cambridge, and been such an Anglophile, he would not have, almost singlehandedly, steered a very difficult debate in the Indian Parliament in 1948 after independence that eventually led to the formula creating the modern Commonwealth. But that said, I think, over the years the government of India's attitude towards the Commonwealth has varied; and some feel that it has atrophied and waned, but that's another question.

SO: Did your fellow diplomats rate the Commonwealth when you came to the Secretariat or did they feel that, indeed, you were going to a very faraway place where you would have precious little diplomatic influence?

AB: Well, to be honest, Sue, I think the majority of my fellow diplomats were sceptical about the Commonwealth. Even a larger proportion today, I suspect, are sceptical. There is still a strong feeling that the Commonwealth is a relic of Empire and doesn't cut a lot of weight. India's focus strongly and squarely has been on trying to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, so the UN is vitally important. The G20 now has become very, very important because it brings together all the sort of big economic players of which India feels good to be part of. It started looking more eastwards as well: towards the dialogue partnership with ASEAN, towards the East Asian Economic Cooperation (APEC) group. I suspect the Commonwealth falls somewhere at the periphery of India's foreign policy interests.

SO: During the 1990s - under the premiership of Dr Manmohan Singh - was that a high point in your time at the Secretariat of India's activity and engagement in the Commonwealth?

AB: I think it was a high point. I wouldn't say it was *the* highpoint. I think Prime Minister Narasimha Rao was very committed to the Commonwealth. Incredibly, many believed so was Mr Vajpayee when he was Prime Minister. He was one of those who had led the sceptics' brigade in Parliament as a very young MP, saying India should not join the Commonwealth and yet, when he became Prime Minister he attended CHOGM. He took an interest in

other Commonwealth affairs. I know because I interacted with him at that time along with the Secretary General at the time. But Dr Manmohan Singh nominated an Indian to become the Secretary General and Mr Kamallesh Sharma had his full confidence. He felt that India normally, logically, should take an interest in the Commonwealth, but certainly when India was supporting an Indian Secretary-General, India should do its best to make its contribution felt in the Commonwealth in as many ways as possible.

SO: Amitav, if I could please take you back then to when you came to join the Secretariat, what was your official position?

AB: I joined as Assistant Director in the International Affairs Division. That was the pre-cursor to the Political Affairs Division. Neither that title of the Division nor the title for the rank has endured, but it was, basically, a head of section. I was dealing with the Asian Commonwealth, I was dealing with CHOGM and I was dealing with the incipient democracy programme.

SO: In that case, in terms of the Asian affairs, CHOGMs and the incipient democracy programme, that was part of the incoming Secretary General Chief Emeka Anyaoku's drive for good governance under the Commonwealth auspices too?

AB: That is correct. I think Chief Anyaoku became Secretary General when those two things were happening that I described earlier - the Cold War ending and apartheid crumbling - and every international organisation was trying to find a new role in the post-Cold War era. The Commonwealth was no exception. At that point, I think Chief Anyaoku concluded that good governance needed to be a flagship for the Commonwealth. The very first CHOGM I attended ended up producing a seminal document called the Harare Declaration of 1991. It's an irony that the country where that was adopted and the president who presided over its adoption are no longer in the Commonwealth, for reasons that had to do with Commonwealth values as well.

SO: Amitav, were you in any way a contributor to the drafting of what became the Harare Declaration in the run-up to the CHOGM? I'm aware that there were debates about the phraseology of what should go

forward in terms of embedding good governance within the Commonwealth; and so, obviously, there would've been a great deal of preparatory work in the run-up to the Harare meeting.

AB: There was preparatory work. I was a contributor. I cannot overplay my role there. But it was a difficult challenge to try and get a document adopted by all the members of the Commonwealth at the time that firmly committed them to democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good governance and, therefore, there is a very important phrase there that you may have picked up which says something like 'with deference to national circumstances'. Some people thought this to be a cop-out, but I think Chief Anyaoku was quite firm in his mind that you give countries that room for manoeuvre because every democracy is not the same. There are constitutional democracies; there are monarchical democracies; there are republican democracies; and there are Westminster-style parliamentary democracies. But the key ingredients of democracy, I think... some of the basic ingredients are the same, whatever the outward form. But to answer your question: yes I did have a role in that, as well as four years down the line in preparing the establishment of CMAG, which was meant to give teeth to the Harare Declaration.

SO: Indeed. How did Chief Emeka Anyaoku handle the preparatory process going forward to a CHOGM on such an important document as what became the Harare Declaration? So too, as far as the process of establishing CMAG was concerned: was he embarking upon diplomatic missions, sending out officers to various potentially problematic heads and their civil servants, to try to smooth the ground in the run-up to the heads' meeting?

AB: I think the Chief consulted key members of the Commonwealth in the run-up to CHOGM and a lot of it was done at his own level. I didn't carry out consultations on Harare Declaration language myself. It was a political document and it had to be agreed at a political level. I think experience has shown more than once that if you subject a document like that to drafting through a sherpa process, it can be taken apart. It didn't go through that and a lot of it was, in fact, changed, chopped, amended, agreed at the Victoria Falls summit in Zimbabwe.

SO: I understand that Lord Armstrong was a particularly important drafter for the final document. Am I right in thinking this?

AB: He was. He was one of the key senior officials who was closely consulted in the process. There were a few other senior officials from key Commonwealth countries who played a role. I don't remember the names of all of them.

SO: Do you remember who were identified as being particular members of the potential awkward squad in terms of the Harare Declaration? Or had the preparatory diplomacy resolved those issues before, in fact, heads met?

AB: Well, I don't think I can pinpoint any members of the awkward squad myself because, if they were there, they would've been consulted at levels other than my own. Obviously, President Mugabe had to be on board himself as the prospective Chair of the CHOGM at that time. That does not mean I am describing him as 'a member of the awkward squad'. There were countries that were far from being perfectly democratic at that time and, arguably, there are still challenges of that kind facing the Commonwealth but it was a consensus document. It was a broad political document and it went through, which was quite an historic achievement, and that became the precursor for a number of similar documents in the Francophonie, in the Organisation of American States, CARICOM and elsewhere.

SO: Please could I ask, as a related question? You say that Lord Armstrong was a key official of a large power within the Commonwealth. In what way did you feel, or did you observe, that the Prime Minister, John Major, brought an appreciable difference in attitude and ambience to Britain's relations with the Commonwealth?

AB: Well, that's a difficult one. I think, to some extent, a Prime Minister who succeeded Margaret Thatcher would by contrast have been easily seen as more 'constructive' as far as the Commonwealth was concerned. Mrs Thatcher was completely isolated on the issue of South Africa and Mr Major was her Foreign Minister at the time when, for example, the CHOGM took

place in Kuala Lumpur in 1989. But once she was no longer Prime Minister, I think Mr Major found it easier to, shall we say, come to the Commonwealth consensus on matters. I should mention that the Harare Declaration was preceded by a process called the, if I remember correctly, the High Level Appraisal Group, in which people like Lord Armstrong played quite an important role.

SO: Yes, the High Level Appraisal Group, of course, had been instituted at the Kuala Lumpur Summit, as you identified. There'd been a series of officials' meetings and, in fact, there was one that was chaired by Dr Mahathir very shortly before the Harare meeting, to present to heads the proposed new direction of the Commonwealth and the Secretariat.

AB: I believe so. That took place in Kuala Lumpur a few months before CHOGM. I wasn't there. Max Gaylard might have told you more about that. He was involved quite closely.

SO: Indeed. You mentioned South Africa. Were you part of the mission which went from Harare down to South Africa with Chief Emeka? Or did you participate in any way in Commonwealth activities to promote the negotiations for transition?

AB: I was not, Sue. I would have loved to be, but we had much better people than me doing that. My colleague, Moses Anafu, was very closely involved from the International Affairs Division.

SO: What were your other areas of responsibility in terms of the good governance elements of your work? After Harare, how quickly did you move towards putting teeth into the Harare Declaration with the evolution of the idea of CMAG?

AB: Well, I think the first major component of the new agenda was election observation. The very first election that the Commonwealth observed post-Harare...in fact, within weeks if not days of Harare, was Zambia – where the father of the Zambian nation, Kenneth Kaunda, lost the election. He walked out of State House, which was the honourable and dignified thing to do, and

here was a major Commonwealth statesman showing the way on how to respect the will of the people. Election observation, on the basis of a collectively agreed terms of reference, became a very fast growing phenomenon in the Commonwealth and under my watch we started observing elections aplenty. There were at least half a dozen national elections a year. Election observation by the Commonwealth was very different from other observer groups because they were led at much higher level, usually a former head of state or a former head of government.

SO: Did you run any yourself?

AB: The Secretariat was always part of them and I was part of some election observation groups on the ground, but I ran many more from London, yes. I organised many groups from London. They were multidisciplinary groups. You had people who were election officials, who were media experts, who were civil society experts, who were lawyers. So election observation picked up and, if I know my figures right, between 1991 and today, we must have observed about 140 national elections. Now, that is a large number and we thought this would die down as more and more countries became democratic and were able to stage their own elections without controversy. They would no longer need observers from the Commonwealth but, sadly, that has not happened. On the contrary, the presence of Commonwealth observers and having them give a tick to the process has become something that is much sought after. So the Secretariat is overwhelmed with the demand and simply not able to keep up. There are instances where the answer has to be, "No. You can run a perfectly good election yourself." And, "Sorry, our resources are scarce."

The second element of good governance was the Good Offices programme. Again, this was started by Chief Emeka. He coined a phrase at that time called 'intermestic issues'. These are domestic issues that have international repercussions potentially in the region and beyond. Very slowly, very carefully, very warily, we took Good Offices missions to the agenda of governments and they agreed that the Commonwealth, when invited by or when accepted by a government, can advise on domestic political issues.

SO: Amitav, do you recall the process of that cautious engagement with heads? Was it first proposed at a retreat? Was it put into an executive session at a Heads of Government meeting? Or did Chief Emeka identify particular allies as he sought to build the momentum towards the establishment of this programme?

AB: My memory fades on this, as it fails me a little bit on exactly what the process was, but I think it was discussed at a retreat. It was not put on the agenda of an executive session. It needed to be discussed first *in camera*, so to speak, so that fears and reservations were addressed and removed. There were countries that were very anxious at the time because they felt that this was, potentially, intrusive.

SO: Were these particular African countries?

AB: I think it went beyond Africa. I can certainly think of Asian countries that were not comfortable. I wouldn't want to identify them. But it was accepted and it was accepted on the basis that the concurrence of the country in question was a *sine qua non* and the Commonwealth could not come in as a cowboy and say, "I've come to fix your problems for you." The concept of sovereignty in those days and of non-interference in internal affairs was still very strong, in the mid-1990s. In the UN you could not have hoped to get a resolution through that set up a Good Offices programme of this kind, but in the Commonwealth it took root. The Secretary General's own Good Offices, for example, helped to get the King of Lesotho back to the country through very quiet negotiations with the then military regime and with the backing of other key players. So that was a major success.

The third element, Sue, was the formation of CMAG, four years after Harare. Again, this was carefully, I think, planned by Chief Emeka. He felt that you could not just have a declaration without translating it into some sort of practical and implementable programme and, therefore, the Millbrook Action Programme came into being in 1995, which gave teeth to the Harare Declaration by forming CMAG, a group of foreign ministers that, effectively, sat in judgement on their peers and on fellow governments in the Commonwealth.

SO: Amitav, please could I ask you, how did the Chief's particularly Good Offices programme correspond to and interact with CMAG?

AB: Well, there is a close relationship between the two and it is sequential. The logic is, and remains to this day, that if the Secretary General's Good Offices fail, then he or she should be able to refer a country to CMAG saying, "I have done my level best to deal with such and such elements of derogation from Commonwealth values. I have given the country the fullest possible chance to redress the wrongs, to respond to our concerns. I feel I have done as much as I can do now and I don't think we have reached the Promised Land. I am hence referring this to CMAG." That's how it was meant to work. In the new CMAG mandate which came into being at Perth in 2011, there is a further refinement of this linkage where CMAG itself, before it formally lists a country on its agenda, could reinforce the Secretary General's Good Offices. So the SG can be in touch with the Chair of CMAG even if a country is not formally on its agenda. That new remit is still bedding down and the jury is out on how well it has worked, but while they are distinct – the Secretary General's Good Offices and the coming into play of CMAG – there is that linkage.

SO: Amitav, the Secretary General's Good Offices calls on a great deal of the Secretary General's time - personal, physical and mental as well as diplomatic energies - and also the financial resources of the Secretariat. Would I be right in making those observations that...?

AB: Yes, but I think it's probably misleading to say 'Secretary General's Good Offices' because it leads people to believe that the Secretary General personally is constantly involved in them. That is not the case. The Secretary General's Good Offices are carried out by staff of the Commonwealth Secretariat; by the Deputy Secretary General; by the Director of the Political Division; by Heads of Section in the Political Division; by the Head of the Good Offices Section, which was explicitly set up to support Good Offices; and by Special Envoys from time to time, who are very high profile people and of whom there are several instances to cite. For example, the late Sir Paul Reeves was Special Envoy both in Guyana and in Fiji.

SO: And Sir Don McKinnon as a Special Envoy to the Maldives.

AB: Yes, Sir Don McKinnon more recently in the Maldives. Mr Joe Clark in Cameroon. Judge Pius Langa in Fiji. Commonwealth Secretariat staff also, sometimes, went virtually as Special Envoys, but the advantage of having a very eminent political figure is that you get taken more seriously and you, obviously, have a wealth of experience to provide. Another example I should cite is that of Sir Ninian Stephen, former Governor General of Australia, who went to Bangladesh, I think in 1994, and offered what later was accepted as a formula for Bangladesh to have credible elections, namely the establishment of a caretaker government 90 days before an election.

SO: This process of the evolution of Good Offices, did it lead to preparations of a strategy document, a clear methodology, the allocation of responsibilities according to regional area expertise? Or was it a more *ad hoc* process by which the most appropriate and available person was identified by the Secretary General's Office?

AB: I believe it started off as fairly *ad hoc* and has got more and more systematised and institutionalised. As I mentioned, we now have a Good Offices Section. We also have a much more holistic strategy within the Secretariat of identifying where there are points of entry in terms of engagement with a country. A country may be interested in youth; there's a huge problem of unemployed, misdirected youth. It could have problems with natural resource management. There are different ways of engaging with a country to find the hook on which to hang a relationship. But by and large, now, it is much more institutionalised in terms of the kind of briefings given.

SO: Am I right in thinking that Sir Don McKinnon sent you particularly in a Good Offices role to Pakistan with your colleague, Syed Sharufuddin?

AB: No. I have never been to Pakistan in my Commonwealth role, except for a meeting in 1994. I would have been the wrong nationality to choose for any Secretary General to send to Pakistan for a Good Offices [*laughter*] role. Sharaf (Syed Sharfuddin), yes. My colleague, Sharaf, has been part of engagements with Pakistan, but I'm not sure it was in a Good Offices role. He

succeeded me as Head of Asia in the Political Division and, of course, he is himself a Pakistan Foreign Service Officer. There was a CMAG engagement with Pakistan that was led by, if I'm not mistaken, the then Canadian Foreign Minister, Lloyd Axworthy. Again, if my memory doesn't fail me, Sharaf went with that mission.

SO: Don McKinnon mentioned in his interview that you and Sharaf were particularly valuable to him in terms of your knowledge of the dynamics of the Pakistan issue.

AB: Well, that may be so. It's kind of him to say so. I was posted in Pakistan as an Indian diplomat and, of course, it's an important neighbour for us in India. I dealt with Pakistan in his office as his Chief of Staff, among other countries and member states of the Commonwealth, and I worked together with Sharaf, but from the London end.

SO: Thank you for clarifying that. Amitav, please if I could ask you: you've talked about the creation and workings of CMAG. Zimbabwe is the issue which particularly comes to mind in terms of the Commonwealth's use of CMAG to address erosion of democracy in the Commonwealth member country. By this time, obviously, there had been the Commonwealth election observation mission of 2002, and its critical report. Hence Zimbabwe was under increasing criticism from members of the Commonwealth. John Howard was the Chair-in-office at that particular point, as well as a member of the 'Troika'.

AB: Yes. I think the role of Chair-in-Office has been much debated and the jury is probably still out on how effective, and successful, and institutional the Chair-in-Office has been. Different Chairs-in-Office have engaged to different degrees with the Commonwealth. Some have been very avid flyers of the flag, if there is such an expression. Representationally, they have made very good use of whatever platforms they have had to also put in a plug for the Commonwealth. I wouldn't want to be drawn specifically into the role of the Chair-in-Office on Zimbabwe, but it did become an important one because CMAG, basically, could not deal with Zimbabwe. It eventually gave up and said to the leaders, "You folks please deal with it at CHOGM" at Cologn in

2003 and that's when the Troika was constituted. The Troika, thereafter, tried to take this forward but eventually collapsed because of its internal dynamics. I'm not sure that the Troika made a big contribution. The suspension of Zimbabwe was very controversial. I remember a stormy meeting where Don McKinnon, as Secretary-General, actually announced the extension of the suspension up to the Abuja CHOGM in December 2003 and he was challenged by a couple of representatives from the floor saying this was extraordinary and it cannot happen in any other international organisation.

SO: Carolyn McAskie of Canada commented that you and Don McKinnon were regularly, she put it, 'beaten over the head' on a number of issues on the Zimbabwe question. Also the accusation was that the Commonwealth was giving Zimbabwe a harder time than it was Musharraf of Pakistan.

AB: Both of those observations, I think, are correct. Carolyn remembers well. Many will say to you that the Africans felt extremely aggrieved that CMAG was trying to focus strongly on Zimbabwe and yet was not focussing adequately on Pakistan and General Musharraf. This was put down to the fact that Pakistan's geostrategic importance in the context of the 'war on terror' was far more than that of Zimbabwe. I think that's all part of the very complex scenario at that time when, for more reasons than one, a number of countries felt that Zimbabwe was not dealt with in a completely even-handed way. But then at the Abuja CHOGM in 2003, when Zimbabwe's suspension was extended by CHOGM itself, that was done on the basis of a committee.

SO: Indeed. But chaired by Prime Minister Patterson.

AB: Prime Minister Patterson of Jamaica. It had India in it. It had South Africa in it. I don't think that process could be faulted at all, so many of us were very surprised when, soon afterwards, Southern African countries led the charge and said that this was all kangaroo justice and Zimbabwe walked out of the Commonwealth saying, "To hell with you. We don't need to stay." So it was quite a painful and difficult time.

SO: Was there a deliberate approach, to compensate for the formal departure of Robert Mugabe's government from the Commonwealth, to maintain Commonwealth civil society links? In other words, to paraphrase the ANC President Oliver Tambo's words to Sir Sonny Ramphal, the government of Zimbabwe might have left the Commonwealth, but the people of Zimbabwe had not.

AB: Yes. I think, up to today, many people believe that this was a decision by President Mugabe and that the people of Zimbabwe would not necessarily have voted for something like that in a referendum had they been asked. I think President Mugabe felt humiliated and, considering the history of Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth, it was entirely his decision, probably out of pique, and people are convinced that Zimbabwe will one day return to the Commonwealth under new leadership. Yes, there was a conscious effort by a group of civil society organisations to maintain people-to-people links with Zimbabwe. I don't know what has come of it in the last couple of years. It seems to have withered on the vine.

SO: I'm aware that Stuart Mole had arranged for Morgan Tsvangirai to speak of Commonwealth civil society actors around the periphery of the Kampala meeting. I think that he drew Zimbabwe civil society activists to the heads' meetings so that they would have the opportunity of meeting, as I say, on the fringes of that convention.

AB: Yes, but there was also a conglomerate of half a dozen Commonwealth organisations that met regularly, that people like Carl Wright and Mark Robinson were involved with.

SO: Amitav, I'm conscious that time is marching on. If I could ask you general questions about the Commonwealth going forward and your particular view, given the longevity of your service to the Secretariat and your extraordinary institutional memory. (I must say this is really quite remarkable and, fortunately, went against the process of post-rotation which was being practiced.) What do you feel about the future of the Commonwealth? At the moment, as we were remarking, there's going to be a meeting of Foreign Ministers at the United Nations. Do we

still need, do you think, a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting given that the time available at these meetings has dramatically contracted? And because there are so many other international summits and international organisations? Do you feel that, in fact, using the UN environment would be a more appropriate usage of busy heads' time?

AB: I personally don't think you can do away with the Heads of Government Meeting. If you did, whatever is left of the Commonwealth will also vanish. In the UN, the Commonwealth is not a bloc. It is not a caucus. All Commonwealth countries belong to various groupings -- the Asian Group, the African Group, the Western European and Others Group, the Latin American Group, etc. You do need summit meetings. You do need heads of government to come together periodically. You can certainly tinker with the periodicity if you wish and, yes, you have to do something to take account of the fact that there are a plethora of summits and that heads of government's time is at a premium. That is why the CHOGM itself has now reduced to two and a half days from what used to be two weeks at one time. Of course, at that time people travelled by ship. But even when I joined in 1990, CHOGMs were longer than they are now.

I think the problem lies elsewhere. The problem lies in the commitment of countries to the Commonwealth. I think the problem lies in a new generation of leaders who have come into office. I talked earlier about the modern Commonwealth, perhaps, not coming into being without Jawaharlal Nehru because he had such a strong affinity to the Commonwealth. But that generation of Nehru, Nyerere, Nkrumah and Kaunda had a natural passion for the Commonwealth. As new generations come into being, with different political leaders, I don't think they're as committed to the Commonwealth and they fall victim more easily to the argument that the Commonwealth is really a post-colonial club. That's where it's really important for every head of government to be able to demonstrate what the Commonwealth means to their country in tangible ways. He or she has to answer that questions to their constituents, "What is in it for us?"

The Commonwealth's agenda has undergone quite a lot of change over time. Less and less resources are available because resources have to be shared, and also countries are in difficult circumstances, but it means that the development agenda has been hit quite hard. The CFTC has declined, certainly in real terms very sharply if not in nominal terms. The big donors have prioritised good governance - democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and while the developing countries and the smaller states also believe in these, by and large, they say that "We have to lift people out of poverty. We have to achieve the MDGs"; and now the putative SDGs, I suppose. So looking to the future, I think the Commonwealth is in a difficult position at the moment. It is badly polarised between North and South, and there have been bloody battles in the Commonwealth Secretariat's Board of Governors that I have been privy to. It needs what Nehru described in the context of the world in 1948: it needs 'a touch of healing'.

SO: Amitav, what is your personal opinion also on the debate around the Human Rights Commissioner? Do you feel that this would be a useful office to support the work of the Secretary General, but also the good governance agenda of the Commonwealth? And what also of the idea of an Election Commissioner?

AB: Well, let me take one at a time. I think the Commissioner for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law proposal made by the Eminent Persons Group did not carry traction in Perth and was probably the most landmark proposal that was shot down. I feel that the traffic is not going to bear that, to have a Secretary General as well as a parallel tsar dealing with human rights for more reasons than one. One is that the UN system has a High Commissioner for Human Rights, who has a global remit. The other is that any Secretary General who commands the confidence of the membership at large needs to be able to take forward the Democracy and Human Rights agenda as an intrinsic part of the job description. So you, arguably, don't need another institution. I think in many ways the Human Rights agenda has become also more complex, with gay and lesbian rights, and with the death penalty, which are divisive issues across the Commonwealth and need an incremental engagement approach. So I feel that getting agreement on a Commissioner for Human Rights is not going to be easy at all.

SO: Do you think it's desirable? You've implied 'No', because those responsibilities are vested in the office of the Secretary General.

AB: Well, I am a political animal. I think it's certainly desirable that human rights are upheld and that countries are called to account if they violate human rights. I personally don't think you need a Commissioner for Human Rights to do that.

SO: Thank you.

AB: On an Election Commissioner: I don't know what the role would be of a Commonwealth Election Commissioner. There is now a Commonwealth Electoral Network, which is, I think, one of the major legacies of the current Secretary General, which brought together all the national election management bodies of the Commonwealth in 2010. That has already raised the game in terms of peer support to national election management bodies and that graph is going up in terms of the ability of countries to conduct credible elections.

SO: Amitav, you made reference to this question of resources. How much is the Commonwealth, also going forward, stymied by limited financial resources so it isn't able to provide the necessary ongoing support for countries which have made progress towards democracy and human rights? I'm thinking particularly of the case of The Maldives which was very much identified as a Commonwealth 'good news' story and yet, there has been a regression in terms of human rights observance, and political oppression. Mohamed Nasheed, the elected president in 2008, is back in jail now. It's the equivalent of Nelson Mandela returning to jail as a liberation leader who was elected to lead his country and now has found himself back inside. Do you think this is, in fact, an important limitation of the Commonwealth going forward?

AB: I think it would probably be misleading to blame the lack of resources or the diminution of resources available to the Commonwealth for what has happened in The Maldives. I don't think the Commonwealth alone can

guarantee the protection of democracy, or human rights, or the rule of law in any one country. A number of factors go into that and there are a number of international players who can and do support that. But I will say that the diminution of resources has definitely hurt the Commonwealth, because if you want the Commonwealth to play to its full potential then it does not help for it not to have adequate resources in its coffers. You have to obviously show that resources are well spent and that there is impact. That is the way of the world. You have to have results based management and the big donors who contribute about 70% of the budget have, in the past, felt that that is not the case. But the Commonwealth on the other hand is not a development organisation like DFID is, or UNDP is, or SIDA is. I think it's more in the area of institution building that the Commonwealth can give support. In my mind, I have no doubt that there has to be prioritisation, because the Commonwealth cannot possibly be all things to all people.

SO: Just taking your statement forward, that the Commonwealth cannot be all things to all people, in terms of the debate about expanding the Commonwealth's membership. I know that you were with Moses Anafu on the mission to investigate whether it was appropriate for Cameroon to join the Commonwealth back in 1993/94. Do you have a particular opinion on the desirability of expanding the Commonwealth?

AB: It's a very good question. I know that people like Lord Howell have made suggestions that you should include Japan and others. We've already had expansion beyond the Anglophone world, so to speak, or the world which was once governed by Britain or another Commonwealth country, and the criteria agreed at Kampala in 2007 actually made provision for extending the net beyond countries that have had a historical or administrative association with an existing Commonwealth country. I personally feel that the character of the Commonwealth will get diluted if you open the doors too widely on the basis of materialistic desires to get resources, or some political reasons that animate particular members. So one has to be careful, I would think, that the character of the Commonwealth is preserved - its commonality of institutions...I always say Commonwealth countries are united by a common language and it's not just the English language...its parliamentary tradition; its legal tradition; its educational systems and so on; but the ability to speak

English is obviously a very, very fundamental part of it. So that rambling answer is only to suggest that, in my view, we should keep it actually quite carefully close and not fling the doors wide open.

SO: Do you think, in fact, there's a place for shrinking the size of the Commonwealth?

AB: I think that would be very difficult to implement in practical terms. If countries leave for their own reasons, that's different. The Gambia did.

SO: Indeed, although that was a rather idiosyncratic decision by its president.

AB: Yes, I don't think the High Commissioner here knew very much about it when I phoned.

SO: President Jammeh's press secretary didn't appear to know much about it either when the announcement was made.

AB: But otherwise, you'd find it very difficult to throw countries out. It's much more easy to regiment the induction of countries than to oversee the elimination of members.

SO: Amitav, please, as two final points. What do you feel has been the greatest achievement of the Secretariat as a diplomatic actor during your time there?

AB: Well, I would, at the cost of sounding a little bit immodest perhaps, say that the greatest achievement has been putting good governance firmly on the global map. I referred early to the creation of CMAG, which till today has not been replicated by any other international organisation. I referred to the Harare Declaration being emulated by others -- The Bamako Declaration of the Francophonie, the Quebec City Declaration of the Summit of the Americas. I think the Mo Ibrahim Index tells a very good story; for the last 3 years running, if I'm not mistaken, 7 or 8 of the top 10 countries in Africa ranked by the Mo Ibrahim Index of Good Governance are Commonwealth

countries. I have been talking to people at the Francophonie and I think there is a fairly ready acknowledgement that Commonwealth Africa has done better than Francophone Africa in terms of democracy, rule of law and human rights.

SO: Amitav, during your time at the Secretariat, what did you do to promote, to boost and to facilitate the Commonwealth's relationship with the Francophonie?

AB: There are annual meetings at the summit level - "summit" in quotation marks - that is between the two Secretaries General. They alternate between Paris and London. Once a year I would meet with my opposite number, the Political Director of the Francophonie, and we would exchange notes. There are a number of countries in common between the Francophonie and the Commonwealth. There have been also one or two instances in the past of joint election observation. But I wouldn't overplay the tangible cooperation and collaboration. It was really more in the nature of exchanging notes and then collaborating on the ground because we are intrinsically quite different organisations.

SO: In your view, does the Francophonie remain more of a cultural organisation rather than a diplomatic platform for its member states?

AB: Yes. I think it certainly started off as one, but the peer pressure of the Commonwealth has helped to make them more of a governance promotion organisation. And I would say Canada has played a very important role, as a member that straddles the two, in terms of pushing the Francophonie in the direction of promoting good governance.

SO: Finally, Amitav, what is your view and personal experience of the contribution of the Queen as Head of the Commonwealth and the likelihood of Prince Charles succeeding her?

AB: Well, I think the Queen is a remarkable person and, by common agreement across the board, she is part of the glue that keeps the Commonwealth together. She has seen heads of government come and go. She's been very much the common thread running through and even the most republican of

nations do not fail to show her the respect that she commands as Head of the Commonwealth. All the countries that today join the Commonwealth or line up to join the Commonwealth know that they would need to accept her as the Head of the Commonwealth, without surrendering their sovereignty. So I think she's a very remarkable part of Commonwealth history. As for the future, the official position, of course, is that the heads of government will decide when the time comes. I think the Prince of Wales has been increasingly taking interest in Commonwealth matters and visiting Commonwealth countries. He's been at a few CHOGMs.

SO: Indeed, and represented his mother at the Sri Lanka meeting in 2013.

AB: He was there in Colombo. I think he was there, together with his mother, in Kampala in 2007. In my personal view, it would be important to keep that connection in the future, but it's not for me to say what heads of government in their wisdom will decide.

SO: The upcoming CHOGM in Malta in November of this year will choose a new Secretary General. In your view, what has been the greatest diplomatic achievement of Secretary General Sharma? He has come under a great deal of criticism on a number of human rights issues across the Commonwealth and has borne this with a great deal of good grace. Where do you feel that public attention and media criticism should have been much more focussed and directed in terms of the achievements in his time in office?

AB: Well, I wouldn't want to get drawn into this question because I worked with him till the other day. Certainly, an example I gave you a little while earlier of the Commonwealth Electoral Network is a very positive legacy of Mr Sharma. It was his brainchild that there should be a network that brings together all the election management bodies in the Commonwealth that could incrementally raise the bar and promote collaboration among peers. So I would say that is very much a positive achievement.

SO: I understand that he was also determined at the start of his time in office in 2008 to push forward technical collaboration across the Commonwealth. Am I right in thinking that?

AB: He has brought in a number of initiatives that use information technology as a way of linking up the Commonwealth. "Commonwealth Connects" is what it is called and it has now spawned a number of areas of virtual collaboration. I myself didn't have a lot to do with these, but the Commonwealth Electoral Network itself uses IT based collaboration. So an election commissioner can ask a question in a protected environment of the whole body of election commissioners that he or she would otherwise find difficult to do without attending a conference and having a session devoted to that particular issue. Mr Sharma has been convinced that in a situation where resources are dwindling and where you can't have specific departments dealing with health, or with agriculture, or with industrial development, or with export market development, you could, perhaps, use networks that are digitally based to at least subserve some of those objectives. And I think that's something that is also deemed to be his contribution.

SO: Amitav, thank you very much indeed.

AB: Thank you, Sue.

[End of transcript]