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INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

VOICE FILE NAME: COHP (Dame Billie Miller)

Key:

SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

BM: Dame Billie Miller

SO: Dr Sue Onslow interviewing Dame Billie Miller at Mount Standfast, Barbados, on Monday, 12 January 2015.

Dame Billie, many thanks indeed for agreeing to take part in this oral history of the Commonwealth project. We are particularly keen to capture the recollections of leading Caribbean politicians, to ensure the project has as broad a coverage as possible.

BM: I strongly recommend you should interview former Prime Minister PJ Patterson, if you can. He was one of those outstanding, committed Caribbean regionalists. You always knew who they were: those who started CARIFTA, those who had the courage to say, "Cuba is our neighbour and friend". These included Forbes Burnham in Guyana, Errol Barrow in Barbados, the Manleys of Jamaica; even in the OECS there were outstanding regionalists. They were many of the forerunners to what became CARICOM. Many of the heads were deep and truly committed regionalists. Then it came to a place where fewer of the heads were, I thought, true regionalists and even more recently, I would say PJ Patterson was the last of the true regionalists who believed in it and understood that it's the only way forward for the Caribbean. I observed PJ Patterson when we were putting together the CCJ [the Caribbean Court of Justice]. In the face of very serious opposition from his parliamentary colleagues, the entire Bar Association in Jamaica and indeed the general sentiment in Jamaica, he put regional before national interests. Even to this day Jamaica is still not signed on to the

appellate jurisdiction of the Court. This court has two jurisdictions: the original jurisdiction and its appellate jurisdiction. The Court's original jurisdiction has to do with the interpretation of the Treaty of Chaguaramas which governs the CARICOM. The appellate jurisdiction then had to do with our country's moving away from the British Privy Council and having the CCJ as our final court of appeal. There were only two countries who signed on at the beginning, and that was Barbados and Guyana. Trinidad and Tobago, which is the seat of the court, is still holding out and they still send their final appeals to the Privy Council.

SO: How do you account for this resistance?

BM: There are a lot of things which, in the Anglophone Caribbean, we still hold on to - which Britain has abandoned or given up, but we cherry pick. I think it's disastrous. Now in the 21st Century, I was hoping that would have been behind us, but it's still there. There are a lot of things that we hold on to. I remember as a young minister in 1976, while I was being introduced to the staff, I was told that the chief health planner, Cortez Nurse, was away on "home" leave. I said to my first Permanent Secretary, who was my best ever - he taught me everything I needed to know about the civil service - I said, "Home leave? This is 1976! Where is 'home'?" We were already independent, you know! And had been for a decade! It was more than I could manage. This is what we do and maybe a few others in the Pacific and maybe a few small states. I'm not sure about how many now are still remaining from Africa who hold on to these old colonial, pre-independence anachronisms. What message does it send to the world? That we don't have confidence in our own final Court of Appeal? I wish that the young attorneys in today's Anglophone Caribbean would become more insistent about the rest of the Caribbean moving to the CCJ. It is very sad.

After PJ Patterson demitted office, then Owen Arthur was seen to be his natural successor in the commitment to regionalism. But then he fairly quickly demitted office after PJ Patterson; and I have to say with enormous regret that I do not see, among the leaders since that time, anyone who stands out as a strong regionalist and who would put region sometimes before national interests.

SO: Dame Billie, is diminishing regionalism associated with the diminishing perception of the value of the Commonwealth?

BM: Not particularly. That's part of it, but not, I'd say, the driving part of it, or the most important part of it. It is how we see ourselves now in this hemisphere because this is where we have our being, in Latin America and the Caribbean. Even now, it's still a largely fractured region. I was part of a generation where we fought to have the 'C' (Caribbean) added to 'L.A'. Even now in meetings with the Latins, people have to be reminded of this.

SO: Dame Billie, going back to your own particular experience: what was your own personal view of the value of the Commonwealth as a young barrister? Its perceived value as you moved into politics and then into political office?

BM: Well, for me it was very important. It was very important. I like to think of myself as somebody who has no illusions about what was best that we held on to coming out of the colonial experience, and what it was important to jettison. When I first came to practice in Barbados, I was the only woman at the private bar. I did that for eight years before I became the first woman to sit in the cabinet of Barbados. In all respects there were important Commonwealth connections. The CPA (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association) is one of them. Our Parliament, I think, has always been a good member of the CPA, even though we've had trouble keeping a regional CPA body going. This has a lot to do with leadership and commitment within the region as well. It also had to do with having a regional Secretariat which serviced little islands in differing manifestations, because in the Caribbean we have some bicameral legislatures like Barbados', but some unicamerals as well. I am very much a voice in the wilderness for Barbados going to unicameral status. Nobody's listening to that.

SO: Why are they so resistant? One would think that it's a natural progression.

BM: This is my view, and our upper house is really an anachronism. It has an interesting history to what used to be called the old Legislative Council, where the government sat in those colonial days. This is pre-independence, but I

thought that independence would have been just the right time to go unicameral. It works beautifully in those places in the Caribbean where they have it. Our Senate is a deliberative chamber. There's virtually no power. They can't make a difference and we hold on to this myth that it's a good way to break in young people who want to go through a political career and so on; and that it's a good way to bring private sector people in and civil society to have representation. But you can do that in the unicameral chamber. I think you can do that too. But they don't like it. They like the pomp and the circumstance.

SO: Please, what were your perceptions of the Commonwealth when you came into government?

BM: It was strong, very strong. I'd lived a number of years in England and in my student years, my world was the Commonwealth. Throughout my political career, I would meet the Commonwealth at the UN or the ACP. I would meet it sometimes at Brussels when I went as the Minister for Foreign Trade and our great friend there was Glenys Kinnock, who was a MEP at that time. She was dedicated to the Afro-Caribbean Pacific states, but particularly the Caribbean, in the European Parliament. She helped and supported a lot of the positions we were taking in terms of trade. Then of course Richard Bourne, who's a dear old friend going back, whom again I met in a Commonwealth connection. He encouraged me on one or two missions. The Commonwealth is a recurring decimal! In fact I think this may be the third, possibly the fourth time the Commonwealth is examining itself and at some point it's going to have to come to a conclusion!

SO: It is. Rather than writing endless studies, having gathered detailed reports from experts, which then sit and moulder on somebody's shelf.

BM: That's how I first met Richard (Bourne).

SO: Indeed, towards the end of the 1980s when he was experiencing a sense of crisis in the Commonwealth, because of the issue of human rights.

BM: You got it right [laughter], and we've been in touch since.

SO: Dame Billie, going back to your early political career: how beneficial did you feel it was for Barbados, but also for the Caribbean, having a Secretary General who was from the Caribbean, in terms of raising the profile of the region in international affairs?

BM: That made a big difference because the Caribbean did close ranks behind our Secretary General and perhaps it's one of the grandest things in terms of Commonwealth that would have happened to us in the 20th Century. Sonny is a regionalist; and he did give us greater prominence, although he was very even handed in his dealings.

The Commonwealth was a grander thing, even then. All of the Commonwealth bodies, and as a student you went to High Street Ken which is still my favourite high street of all. If I stop over in London I stay at the Hilton, High Street Ken.

SO: You would come down from Durham University, specifically to go to High Street Ken? And to visit the Commonwealth Institute?

BM: You better believe that! And now it's no more. I saw when it just became virtually derelict and now there are very spiffy 21st century-looking town houses going up and condominiums going up on that old location. You would go to the Commonwealth Institute for all kinds of things: you'd go there for concerts, for talks, meetings, all kinds of things, so even at that level, as a poor young student, you could be involved and it meant something. When I first came back (to Barbados), oh yes, the Commonwealth was important. You met it at almost everywhere you went. You didn't have to be making a case for it. It spoke for itself. It was a force.

SO: When you were first Minister of Health and Education, did you find the regular meetings with your Commonwealth colleagues particularly useful? Had they instituted that practice in the 1980s, when you were Minister of Education?

BM: Yes, yes.

SO: I'm just wondering what would be the types of discussions which would have emerged at these health and education ministers' meetings: teacher training, content of the curriculum, university access?

BM: The Commonwealth meetings were a high point in the lives of ministers of health and education. We were all engaged. Sometimes, these debates would inform the agenda of CHOGM on a regular basis. Later when I became Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade I had a better appreciation of issues coming up from these meetings, having been there myself. Some of these policies which had emerged when I had been Minister, had come to fruition. When they come up to the CHOGM, I would have an inside view of their history as I'd been part of it. I had an advantage that other Foreign Ministers who had not been through the same Commonwealth apprenticeship did not have.

When I went to the Ministry of Education, it was a time when we were doing a lot of important things; teaching training was one of them. The way we structured our schools: there was a school building program going on, we were doing new things in primary and secondary education, and tertiary. We'd just put on the ground, in my time in fact, the opening of the Barbados Samuel Jackman Prescod Polytechnic. Then there was the Barbados Community College: in my time there was a big fight going on with the University of the West Indies, trying to persuade them that the Community College should be able to offer an associate degree - we had about 23 secondary schools at that time but just a handful had sixth forms - as an alternative to sixth form and a shortcut, and it took off. It was a concept that former Prime Minister Sandiford, who is still alive and well, when he was the Minister of Education had as his big vision and it came to pass. In the Caribbean what we did in the latter half of the 20th Century was important work, putting these secondary and post-secondary institutions on the ground.

SO: Was that also part of a regional approach to tertiary education, supported by the Commonwealth?

BM: Yes, yes, very supportive. The Commonwealth were very supportive of this, because we had moved away from Oxford and Cambridge as examining bodies. In my day, I did Oxford and Cambridge, in the sixth form and fifth

forms, but now the CXC has really, really come into its own. It does great work. I'm very impressed.

SO: So when you became Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1994 in Owen Arthur's cabinet, you had already had this professional, personal and also legislative contact with the Commonwealth in terms of your portfolios? There were multiple Commonwealth dimensions to your work?

BM: Yes, even my first portfolio health. When I first came to that, as a young, green minister who didn't have a clue, there was a very wonderful person here as the EU Delegate. He was an Englishman and his name was Mr. Kelly, as I remember. I said to him, 'I have this grand idea for a network of polyclinics which would replace the very humble, early health centres, which started in my father's time when he was Minister of Health. Mr. Kelly said, "There's money still lurking about, left over from Lome 1, and you can have it." With that money we built the first polyclinic. So even then the Commonwealth connection would have been as strong as the EU delegation connection because that was new to me.

SO: How useful do you feel the Commonwealth dimension was in supporting the emergence of women in professions, in politics, in supporting work with particularly women's issues and development, health...?

BM: Not that strong. I wish it were stronger. I really wish it were stronger. There were wonderful women that I met from all over the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, this is 2015. It was founded in 1911, so it would be 114 this year.

SO: You were the first woman chair of the CPA Executive committee?

BM: Yes. And only woman to date.

SO: "The only woman to date" – that is pretty disgraceful.

BM: Yes, it is. When they were having their centennial they asked me to write a paper for a big coffee table type book which was going to be presented to the Queen and all of that kind of thing. I spoke to it in the piece that I wrote. I was invited to London to speak to it at the CPA's big Centennial and it was quite a thing. There were two women in particular who were vying for the leadership. There might have been more but I can't remember now. It was an election year. It was the first time I can remember a Brit winning the chair of the CPA as well because Britain would tend to hold back and let the rest of the Commonwealth go forward on these issues. One was from Tonga, I think, and I was speaking. I only had like 10 minutes or something like that, and suddenly groups of women started literally running into this room from other meetings, there were like three or four sessions going on at the same time.

We were at a hotel in Central London - I can't remember now what it was called - and the room suddenly became full, people were standing and apparently what happened is that somebody ran out and said, "You need to come and listen to this." Particularly because they were women now vying for the leadership and serious campaigning was going on. Of course I could not get into the campaigning but I said my piece and was really disappointed that no woman won. Britain won that one. I remember years earlier when we were trying to get a women's parliamentary group within the CPA and had a hard time. Again, I wanted to appear to be even handed. There were more than a few good men who supported it but not nearly enough. It had a difficult time coming into being. I'm not so much in touch for many years now, so I don't know how influential it is, but more and more women are coming to the parliaments of the Commonwealth but I don't know how well they're doing within the CPA. I am not sure how the CPA is doing now.

SO: How far do you see the CPA as a traditional organisation following a curve, rather than trying to blaze a trail and to...

BM: I'm afraid so.

SO: ... provide showcase support for the importance of women?

BM: This is it.

SO: The advisory board for this elite oral history project have told me, “You need to capture a woman’s voice. You need to make sure that you interview people across the Commonwealth and, yes, that has to capture the gender aspect as well.” My response is, “Well, the trouble is in the historical period we’re looking at, few women rose to those top positions.”

BM: Indeed, at a time when there was the Queen as head of the Commonwealth. In our Parliament there is no support for a quota system, not then not now. It is rejected in the Caribbean, except in recent times in Guyana where they have a proportional representation system. Here in Barbados, we’re never going to have a quota system in my lifetime. The attitude is, “Women on your own individual merit: we’ll support you, but on your own merit. No quota system.”

SO: But there are other disincentives and other barriers to women going into politics.

BM: Many barriers. I addressed it in that CPA centennial paper I wrote. I said, “First of all, you’ve got to make it into the party. You’ve got to make it into the politics within the politics of the party. You have to fight for the support of a prime minister or a party leader if you’re in opposition, a party leader anyhow; and you have to fight civil society. You have to fight all these things, and the media who are very good at trashing women’s platforms”.

SO: And the other dirty politics aspect of it? That’s a personal, massive disincentive to...

BM: I spoke to that as well. I must give you a copy of that paper. So often have I approached women who I thought were interested and I mentor a lot of women, both here and outside of Barbados in the eastern Caribbean who are interested. Sometimes emails would come to me asking, “Please mentor me”. But once discussion started they often said to me, “I’m good at what I do. I’m brilliant at my career, I’m happy and I’m respected by my peers. If it is going to be that as a right of passage I have to somehow negotiate the gutter politics, I’m sorry, I’m not willing to do this. I have children, I have a family, I manage both. I don’t want to be having to explain to my sons and my

daughters why I have to do this.” I would say to them, “You don’t have to take on the gutter politics, you make your choice. I didn’t think that I had to do it.” I’ve never canvassed in rum shops. My chief canvassers will go in and do what they had to do, but I never felt that I had to do that. I never felt that I had to make the case for myself as a woman. I just never did. Maybe it’s how I was brought up. I come from a very political family. I fought eight elections and the one time I lost my seat in ’86, I lost it to my first cousin who is a man and then I promptly won it back at the next election. I’ve got another cousin who represents the far left. We cover the whole spectrum!

SO: Do you feel that the fact that you’re a woman was one of the explanations why you were not chosen as leader of the party after Owen Arthur?

BM: No, that was personal choice. I’ve never wanted to be.

SO: I wondered. I’m aware Mia Mottley became his successor. I have read that she was a surprise successor, that you would have been the natural successor.

BM: I started to mentor her from when she was 14. I’m still close to her, but I was never interested in the leadership. We had arrived at the point where the leadership succession at that time had to skip a generation. Previously, we had put three immediate contemporaries into the leadership one after the other.

SO: The reason I ask that is that I had also asked Flora MacDonald why she had not been chosen as her party’s leader (the Progressive Conservatives) in 1976.

BM: I remember her.

SO: I’m sure you do, because you were on the CHRI Advisory Group when she was Chair. She had put her failure to secure the leadership of her party entirely down to misogyny in Canadian politics in the 1970s.

BM: I never wanted it. There was a bloodless change when Owen Arthur became leader of the Barbados Labour Party in opposition.

SO: How far did the the US invasion of Grenada cause a crisis within the Barbados Labour Party? To what extent was this not just political ill feeling, but personal ill feeling as well?

BM: Yes, both.

SO: There was also a Commonwealth dimension to this crisis.

BM: Yes. God, this is a long story! In 1970-1 I was Secretary-Treasurer of the Barbados Bar Association at that time, and this was the beginning that I first met Maurice Bishop. People believe that we knew each other in London. We happened to be in London doing our Bar finals virtually at the same time, but our paths never crossed. You may recall that there was Mr Gairy and Maurice's party, the New Jewel Movement. I used to be in Grenada a lot and saw how that emerged and so on, and became friends with them. Then of course Maurice was badly beaten up. He came to Barbados for medical attention and as secretary of the Barbados Bar Association, I asked the organisation of Caribbean Bar Associations at one of its meetings, I said, "Is the Bar not going to have an opinion on this? Are we just going to ignore the fact of what's going on in Grenada?" Not in so many words, but what was said to me was "You can do what you want to do, but if you come to grief, don't call on us."

I got personally involved, and got very busy. I wrote letters to every organisation I could think of all over the world, but I was like just a one-woman band. Then more terrible things happened and there were serious cases coming down. People were being accused of treason and murder and manslaughter and so on, and horrible things were happening. There was a group of attorneys from all across the Caribbean who agreed they would go down to do these cases, pro-bono - only to discover that the courts start at 7 o'clock in the morning, rather than 9 o'clock which is the usual time. These things were going on and I said to the lunch table in the chambers where I was, (I was very political), "I'm going to go down there and I'm just going to go to every district court, every country court, whatever and see what's

happening, see what the case notes look like”, and so on and so forth. As soon as I booked my flight, a message came from Sir (Eric) Gairy to say that I'd better not come. Henry Ford and Jack Dear said, “You know, we think your life is worth more than this.” Then I found other ways around that. I found people who were prepared to do that work for me there and I just was relentless. I went on with it and then after a while they started to *nolle pros* [no prosecution], and in the more serious cases murder would be reduced to manslaughter and so on, and they didn't pursue a lot of those prosecutions.

So it was felt that I was quite close to Maurice Bishop. I was introduced to the New Jewel group. Then the revolution happened. I was following it very, very closely. It was in October and I was Minister of Education and going off to the annual UNESCO meeting in Paris. I remember at that cabinet meeting, I was leaving cabinet a little early to get to the airport and Prime Minister Adams caught me at the door. He said, “Billie, a moment before you go. We have to make a decision, possibly today, about where we stand as a government on this issue. I know that you're very close to Maurice. Have you got anything you'd like to say before you leave?” I said, “Thank you Prime Minister, what I want...” I'm getting emotional because it's really difficult, as the youngest in the cabinet, the only woman in the cabinet, you know, sometimes you would feel very lonely. I wish that there were more women there to give support. But I said to him, “Prime Minister, if this cabinet, this government was beleaguered in a similar fashion to which the Grenada government finds itself today, what would we do? Wouldn't we look to other leaders for support?”

The thing is when Maurice led the coup, he would not be persuaded to have an election soon after and legitimate his own government. There are a lot of reasons why, but I said to the Prime Minister, “From what I know, we would have to move very quickly. I believe that Maurice may be dead before the end of the week.” And he was killed on the Friday. So that was a very, very difficult time then. Members of our cabinet went down to see in the aftermath. Of course Dame Eugenie (Charles) had done her appeal and so on, and the Americans went in. Louis Tull went down with a group from Barbados, to see how they then could engage. I remember, when I came home from UNESCO he said, “Do you know among the documentation that I saw when I went down with the group after the killings and so on that Maurice reinstated you as *persona grata*? Did you know that Sir Eric Gairy actually by written

document had made you *persona non grata*?" I said yes I knew, but I didn't know that Maurice had done this. For a woman who works so hard for the Caribbean it's amazing how I've been made *persona non grata* in three Caribbean countries! But that's another long story [laughter].

SO: There were multiple reasons why you were particularly affected by this crisis, for regional geopolitical reasons, Barbados' national interest, as well as your personal friendship with Maurice Bishop.

BM: Yes, yes.

SO: For other members of Tom Adam's cabinet, was the Grenada crisis an equally challenging issue on how to address it?

BM: It was, it was. It was very difficult to know how to deal with this because other offers had been made to assist. The Venezuelans had made an offer, the French had made an offer, but in the end it was President Reagan who made a decision. I think it was so traumatic for us in the Caribbean. We were on very thin ice, I'm sure, of how we would go forward; having an idea of what we should be doing and what we could be doing, but not sure of how to negotiate that. A very difficult time.

SO: Well, it split CARICOM, between the Organisation of the East Caribbean States and the others.

BM: Yes it did.

SO: So as far as you recall, how long did it take for this rift to start to mend?

BM: Quite a long time because we didn't always know exactly what the Americans were doing in Grenada. I think the Caribbean was torn. We couldn't be quite sure what was happening; it was like behind a veil in Grenada. Then I'd seen so many things in politics that I thought would never happen. I lived to see it come full circle and saw the people of Grenada eventually make Mr Eric Gairy a Prime Minister again. I couldn't believe it was happening, but it did.

SO: Was there any residual sense, that you recall, of looking to Britain?

BM: We did look, we did look.

SO: Documents in the Thatcher Foundation archive show you didn't receive a positive answer from Thatcher's government, in the months before the invasion. The British response conveys a strong sense of "this is not our backyard".

BM: Yes, and I think that was part of what gave rise to certain indecisions. We didn't expect that. We thought that they would be the first to be in the touch. But that was not the case. We have a long, long history of British war ships coming to our aid for all sorts of things, and this made some people unsure. We didn't know how to step on this one. We were looking for guidance from the Commonwealth and it just wasn't coming.

SO: Yes, and of course it caused enormous problems for Sir Sonny Ramphal at the heads' meeting in New Delhi, three weeks after the American forces went in.

BM: All of that, I remember all of that, yeah.

SO: You didn't go that particular meeting, did you?

BM: No I did not.

SO: I was going to say, that wouldn't have been part of your portfolio.

BM: No, not then, I wasn't the Foreign Minister then, but then we come to other matters. The heads, oh the heads!

SO: You became Foreign Minister in 1994. Please could you elaborate on "the heads, oh the heads!"

BM: Well, under Owen Arthur I would say that, generally speaking, Commonwealth ties strengthened. We were more active in Commonwealth institutions, I was in CPA, Owen Arthur served on the Commonwealth Commission on Small States. He and Don McKinnon became very good

friends and remained so. I regret that Commission on Small States initiative never reached its full potential, but then other things were happening in other institutions and in other places which were meant to be helpful for small states. But when you are micro-states like we are especially in the C and P, mostly in the oceans of the world, the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean, that'll be where we were the leaders in the SIDS. The first UN SIDS meeting was held in Barbados. Climate change was an increasingly important issue then. We were in opposition in those years but there are some things that transcend partisan politics and that was one of them, and still remains because we are threatened and we see the leading edge of it. Some of the Caribbean islands are not so much islands as sand bars and outcroppings of rock really - in the Bahamas for instance – some of those have gone under already.

We were also fighting a tough, tough battle on trade. I don't know why there is a divide over foreign affairs and trade. I think I'm the longest serving Foreign Minister in the Commonwealth; I had foreign trade as well as part of my portfolio. Discussions on trade went on in foreign missions, and there were other negotiations going on as well, certainly in London and Brussels; so this seemed a natural dual arrangement. Owen and I were adamant that these two had to go together. Civil Service didn't like it, fought it tooth and nail, but then other people followed our lead. Canada did, and it was very difficult for small states always. The most recent thing, when I was in Geneva in December (2014) I heard a statement from the new Secretary General of the World Trade Organisation, saying that he is very much in favour and that it's very high on his agenda, to try and resuscitate the Doha Development Agenda, particularly for the LDCs. Of the ACP the Caribbean was the only one to actually negotiate an EPA with the ACP. But in those years when I was lead negotiating Minister of Foreign Trade for the Caribbean in the negotiations for the Economic Partnership Agreement with the EU and going to meetings often in Brussels and so on in the context of the ACP, it was still very, very difficult. We tried to promote a new category of Small Vulnerable Economies (SVEs). The UN has a very..., how shall I say it? It has a structure that does not easily admit of review and we tried to virtually invent a new status for countries like ours.

SIDS don't cover everything, LDCs don't cover everything, and we wanted for Barbados and countries like Barbados - the more developed developing countries - to invent this new status and they fought us tooth and nail. We got there, but it's not something that worked. SIDS was the only other thing that they recognised, within LDCs. People still see us as "you're either in LDCs or you're not". So gradations of LDCs are not really taken seriously. We are too few and too small. So that statement from the Secretary General of the WTO is encouraging, but it is just a great pity that the small states initiative taken by the Commonwealth didn't achieve our objectives.

SO: So you felt this initiative ran into the sand? I've also interviewed Neville Linton who played an important part of the drafting of the original report, *The Vulnerability of Small States*.

BM: I remember him well. He was once married to my very best friend.

SO: I talked to Neville about the New Delhi meeting and the emergence of the Small States Agenda, because of the complex and very different security issues that confronted small states. In the world today the Commonwealth presents itself as a small states organisation, but how effectively does the Commonwealth as an association promote the particular interests of small states? You're shaking your head!

BM: It has not worked well. I remember the beginning of it, before I came to the CPA. I remember that the late Sir Arnott Cato, who was president of our Senate at that time, and Prime Minister Errol Barrow in the attempt within the CPA to have recognition for small states and to have a formal meeting during the CPA's big annual meetings for small states – a subset for small states. That was a long, hard fight and even once we got it, you had to keep defending it every single time, every single time. We were treated like a nuisance. There are too many micro issues, it was felt that there were more important matters to be getting on with.

SO: So in terms of diplomacy, to try to get recognition of the particular challenges facing small states ...

BM: It's an uphill battle all the time. You never quite win. You're never on strong footing. You're on shifting sands, thin ice all the time.

SO: Is it a question of the rigidity in the hierarchy of larger states? A question simply of hard power, or the UN bureaucracy which doesn't want to accommodate small states? Divisions among the small states themselves? Since there is a multiplicity of small states, then surely any united front can start to break down if there are debates about the points of communion. Does this then erode the force of your arguments?

BM: Yes it does, but there was a Commonwealth component in it. For instance, the Pacific islands would always say 'We are Pacific, we are peaceful. Don't worry about us.'

SO: Well, that has not always been the case in Fiji, nor the Solomons, over the past thirty years!

BM: Yes, all of them. "Don't worry about us. Aussie looks after us." Aussie would always stand up and say, "Don't worry about the Asia Pacific. We are looking after them." So Aussie and New Zealand are always more influential, because it's their backyard, their sphere of influence. For the Pacific islanders, their children all go through universities there (in Australia or New Zealand) and so you always have to carry the battle for them. I mean, even with the trade negotiations in the A, the C and the P, the Caribbean is the only group that actually brought something to fruition. The African members in East Africa, Southern Africa and Central Africa still cannot agree on what kind of economic partnership agreement they want to have. It's the same thing with (the) Pacific (group). Of the ACP group, we are the only ones who actually reached an economic agreement with the EU. I was lead negotiating Minister for the Caribbean in the negotiations for the Economic Partnership Agreement with the EU, which we have squandered a lot of, I am sorry to say. We built in a moratorium, which would have all of us time to put our implementation process in place; and each island had to do it. To get CARICOM to do that was very difficult. A few thinking people appreciate the enormity of what we were able to negotiate there; and too few of the benefits

have been taken advantage of, because people don't want to believe in what they have in their hand.

SO: Does this go back to the efficacy of Caribbean diplomacy and the sense of regionalism, rather than having a particularly Commonwealth dimension to it?

BM: Yes, but there was a Commonwealth component to it. People like Glenys Kinnock were very helpful to us because she was our Commonwealth friend first, before she was our friend to the ACP, in the EU Parliament. So she was kind of on a bicycle with those two wheels going at the same time.

SO: So did you have any sense of having a similar friend in any way in the WTO negotiations? I know that you went with Ambassador Kaliopate Tavola as a small states mission.

BM: Again, it's one of those many small states initiatives which you can't see with the naked eye today. Tough, tough, tough, and today, all these years later I'm not sure if this is something that we must continue to pursue or do what we're doing now in the Caribbean, going into larger bodies and making our case within them. In the ACP we were all at different stages at readying ourselves for this new trade relationship.

SO: So it's more of an organic, evolutionary process then of engagement, working from a smaller entity and moving up?

BM: Yes, well, we like to think we are more moving across, rather than we are moving up. We would have more currency in a regional grouping or even a sub-hemispheric because, for instance, the Central Americans have always reached up to us and we have never returned that compliment. An effort was made but it didn't last very long. It didn't last past more than one meeting of the heads with the Central Americans. That allowed us to involve Cuba and the DR (Dominican Republic), but it fizzled out afterwards. For us, we small states on their own, it is very, very difficult, even at the UN. The BRICS were beginning to feel their strength. And so some small states have found a footing in larger, regional organisations which will help them to carry their special interests.

SO: In terms of the small states at the UNO in New York, how far do you think that the Commonwealth initiative in setting up a small states office close to the UNO was helpful, so that it can provide some sort of secretarial administrative back-up, some permanent physical presence for small states...

BM: Helpful, but the UNO is perhaps the most resistant organisation, with all the power at their command. It never resonated. I am not aware of anything that the small states office has done. It's the whole business of 'smallness'. The same thing happened in Geneva. The WTO at Geneva's the same thing. The Commonwealth has set up a very small office to help the OECS. At first we would do it as individuals; for instance, when I set up a mission in Geneva I had to persuade my Cabinet colleagues. It was very costly to do it, but I persuaded Prime Minister Arthur that we didn't have a choice. I would say to my Barbados ambassadors in Geneva, that when ministers came up from CARICOM they should treat them as though I, their minister have arrived. "So all courtesies are to be given, make room for meetings and so on if they need to do that, you do the best that you can." Then the OECS really wanted to have something a little more cohesive and that was exclusively theirs because they're a subset. You see, when you get an even smaller, microscopic subset within small islands, it's really very difficult for people to understand why we are not speaking with one Caribbean voice. This has dogged us all the years that I was in politics. Even today sometimes I meet parliamentarians that I've known from before and even some that are new to me, they say 'your people'. As soon as I hear that, I know exactly what it means: the Caribbean heads will not speak with one voice.

SO: I would like to ask you about the debate that went on in Cuba, at the fringes of the Cuba/CARICOM at the end of last year; but I'll come on to that towards the end of our discussion, if I may. Just to go back to your time when you were Foreign Minister with Owen Arthur: you've stressed that there was a strong Commonwealth theme to the foreign policy strategy of your government. Did you represent Owen Arthur at Commonwealth heads of government meetings, or did you accompany him to these meetings?

BM: Both. Always the Foreign Ministers accompany the Heads: to meetings of heads, to the UN, places like that. I went with Owen Arthur to all Commonwealth CHOGMs. There were two occasions when he could not go to the CHOGM, and I led the Barbados delegation to Coolum, Australia and also to Uganda.

SO: So you went with your Permanent Secretary and...?

BM: No, not always. I think it was 2000 and... it was right after 9/11 and there was a little recession here at the time. It was so small that people didn't seem to recognise it, but Owen could not go. We were going to Sydney and then because of 9/11 they changed location to a very beautiful little place called Coolum. On that occasion there was so much else going on that I went with two Foreign Service officers. I had enough experience that I could manage. I also went to the CHOGM in Uganda in 2007 and had my Permanent Secretary with me there.

SO: This was indicative of the importance Barbados attached to those biannual meetings?

BM: Absolutely. It was a command performance. You had to go, because you got to meet your colleagues in the A and the P, to begin with. It was important also when we got to the UN, and other huge international meetings, instinctively you would have a little ACP caucus, even if only at the level of Foreign Ministers, or sometimes at the level of Heads. You would have a little breakfast caucus and find an opening to talk to each other. That was a big advantage because it allowed us to cover the 'waterfront' sometimes, in those little sidebar caucuses that we would have. The Commonwealth was the glue that brought us together. The Commonwealth was so interesting because you had a good OECD subset within the Commonwealth, and that gave the opportunity for Prime Minister Arthur to have little sidebar meetings to do with the way in which the OECD was giving us a really hard time about off-shore financing. The OECD countries were doing it themselves - the Channel Islands, the British too - so we had the chance to speak about non-Commonwealth issues as well.

So when you went to a CHOGM, you could talk to people on a wide range of issues beyond the agenda of the CHOGM. It was a leisurely kind of meeting in those days. It was the opportunity to speak to your colleagues, to push small states because that was always on our agenda and, in Prime Minister Owen Arthur's judgment, to bring some new issues. You didn't tend to have large discussion at CHOGMs on the economies of small states, the issues as a working economist and as a Minister of Finance, which were important for Prime Minister Arthur, the way in which we had to fight the OECD and that sort of thing. He brought that discussion to the CHOGM, looking for support. When I was deputizing for him at Coolum, we were in the caucus. I don't know if it was because I was a deputy Prime Minister and a foreign minister, but the Heads always treated me with deference and I was often, more often than not, invited into their caucuses in ways that my fellow foreign ministers were not. When the CARICOM heads had the special meeting in St Lucia with Mandela, I was invited in.

There was one occasion when the CARICOM Heads were having their inner caucus in Nevis. We were meeting at St Kitts. You always go off somewhere, just like the Commonwealth, to do the special 'heads only'. I was invited and in that case there was an issue which arose. I was sitting behind Owen Arthur, you know, and leaning forward and saying, "PM, what's being proposed here, it can't be allowed to fly". The meeting was coming to an end and heads were getting up, and he suddenly put up his hand and said, "Excuse me, I need to make a point on this issue". Then he got up and he said to me, "Come sit here, sit here." I said, "Prime Minister, I cannot sit in your chair when you are here at the meeting!" He said, "Do what I tell you". Of course all the heads were, "Oh, what's happening?" He said, "She can speak for this. She knows all about it. Say what you have to say." It had to do with the Dominican Republic (DR) and ACP.

That I would represent Prime Minister Arthur in his absence from CHOGMs was not anything that people made a big thing about. It was the done thing if a Head could not attend, but Mr President Museveni certainly attacked me in Coolum. Something I was saying and he interrupted me and he said, "You think you know everything, you Caribbean people!" My colleagues came to my aid. I didn't have to say a word. I can't remember which, but one of my colleagues said, "Excuse me, you cannot speak to her like that. She is one of

us.” It was hysterical. Prime Minister Tony Blair was there. It was Foreign Minister Hunte from St Lucia who supported me.

SO: Well, he was quite right to call President Museveni to account.

BM: Oh dear, I’ve not had a good history with President Museveni especially when I chaired the Commonwealth Observation Group that went to the last elections.

SO: In 2011?

BM: Yes, yes it was, and it was fraught.

SO: Did he try to stop you?

BM: I don’t think so. What had happened was the Commonwealth had asked two former African Presidents first to lead the Commonwealth observer group, but they declined. That is how things get to me! I was not the first choice. Al Shabaab threatened the electoral process. At least one country withdrew its representative and, you know, “Get out of that country real fast”. I stood my ground and when they came back from the polls, I said to my team - there were 19 of us - and I said, “There is a threat, but...”

SO: From Museveni’s party activists?

BM: We were not sure. Long before I got to Uganda, I had started online following things so that I’d be up to date when I got there, apart from the briefing ComSec would have given me. President Museveni was bringing in some very costly enormous tanks, and the army reserve, right into Kampala. President Museveni had a meeting there, and he invited us all. I went, and we had to sit down for half an hour or so, before we could quietly say, ‘We have to be getting on with our work.’ And I think that is what Al Shabaab was after. They wanted to attack the army headquarters in Kampala and take as much of the hardware that they could.

It wasn’t at all internal Uganda issues. It was Al Shabaab next door (in Somalia); it was thought that they wanted to upset the electoral process, and

were going to blow up the final count. They have three counts at Uganda: you do a count at the local level, and then you do a regional count and then you do the big count at the end, and this was in the garden of the hotel where the whole Commonwealth team was staying, the Serena Hotel in the heart of Kampala. (The Queen had stayed at the Serena for the 2007 CHOGM, so it was very, very secure). Al Jazeera was staying in the same hotel and they would feed some information to me as well. That is what the threat was: not from Museveni, but from Al Shabaab. This is what was fed through to me as head of mission, and I was in close touch with the British, the Americans and Europeans who were on the ground long, long before we arrived. They were very kind, and kept the Commonwealth group up to date on what was happening.

The whole election was a shambles, and quite an experience. None of the voting stations was indoors. People voted outdoors: voting booths had very little preparation, they might put broken branches into the ground and ribbon around that, and a chair as where you would vote. And it was really quite chaotic in some places. I called the SG, Kamalesh Sharma, who was in India because his mother had just died. I telephoned him and said we were safe. During that call, I was very conscious people were watching me; it was in an open public area. But a lot of our people were still out in the field, and they hadn't come back yet come back to base. I reassured the SG, and said all precautions had been taken. When my team came back (to Kampala) I said, "Well, one of our colleagues has been recalled." It was very cloak and dagger. He couldn't come to the hotel, all his stuff had to be taken to a certain place and then picked up from there, and he rushed to the airport and left. To my team, I said, "I've spoken to SG and I'm ready to proceed if you are". Not a word was spoken and then one of them, an English woman, said, "Well, what's No. 1 on the agenda? Why are we waiting? Let's get on with it." The Commonwealth does a wonderful thing with their observer groups, not in the very early years but more recently, you finish the work and you write your report before you leave the country.

SO: Yes, and it was the speed with which you produced the observers' report...

BM: Fantastic. But I felt that I had to write in that report that this election was neither free nor fair.

SO: Billie, if I could ask, were your team members physically intimidated?

BM: Not at all, not at all. I was aware, because I was head of the delegation, of the enormous precautions that had been taken at the CHOGM, because it had been held at the Serena. I was satisfied with the security there. People felt safe; they were reassured by the Commonwealth Secretariat out of London, and by the Ugandan government, and so we did our work. They simply said, "Let's get on with it". I had to call on people in Kampala of course, and some of our observers had to take an airplane, trains and so on to go out into the interior, and they had to go two days before Election Day and sleep over. I was three weeks in Kampala and I said to the team, "These are my cut off points. Beyond a certain point of danger, you come back." I felt very responsible for that. They just did what they had to do. At the end of the mission we were taken to the airport in one huge fleet of cars, with outriders; and we felt ok. But we could not say that the election was free and fair.

SO: Neville Linton commented in his interview that the elections are stolen months before the actual polling date. How far do you think that the Commonwealth observer team to the Ugandan elections arrived relatively late? You mention you had been there for three weeks. In comparison to other international election observer missions, you didn't have the manpower or financial resources of, say, the Carter Foundation in terms of being able to get teams out to view each ward, each constituency.

BM: Agreed. But the manipulation of the election was so transparent. The Parliament had voted large sums of money for every member to fight their campaign. I could not believe it.

SO: So there was no attempt of concealment?

BM: Then, because there was an outcry from the wider Commonwealth and even other countries not in the Commonwealth. Members of the Ugandan Parliament tried to revoke it, and other members said, "I'm sorry, the money's

spent already.” So it was a shambles and we could see on the ground some of what was going on. Of course, I spoke to opposition groups, we moved around and they were very nervous. We could sense that. Now, the week we were still on the ground writing our report on the elections, two days later they were having then municipal elections. It didn’t get past the first day, the first morning. It reminded me what happened in Haiti many years ago: by 10 o’clock in the morning the whole thing fell apart.

SO: With riot police in the streets...

BM: People were shooting. It all had to do with money and buying of votes, and it was just a shambles. A shambles. That strengthened our resolve that the whole thing had been undermined. We were not the only observing group: there was the EU and some from within Africa.

SO: How much do you think that your particular experience underlines the case for the Commonwealth to have a permanent election commissioner?

BM: I thought that the Commonwealth should not do that immediately after the Ugandan election. It should look at the Commonwealth as a whole. I believe the Commonwealth has to think consciously, not as a kneejerk reaction: look at the Commonwealth, see what works well and what works best, where greatest need is - hard decisions may have to be made - and focus on those things. This is true of other organisations and activists of course; it is not just the Commonwealth. But the influence of the Commonwealth in many areas has diminished, overtaken by other organisations, by other groupings.

SO: Yes, it has. It’s diminished in terms of its capacity, its resources and its profile.

BM: But not for bad reasons. It’s not because it failed. It had a structure to do certain things but it’s now been overtaken by the fact that within each hemisphere of the world other organisations have taken precedence and are doing similar work. Even in terms of the work that they do not only with election observation, but governance issues on the whole. International IDEA, of which Barbados is a founder member, is doing work on these governance

issues and election observation. They're doing tremendous work that the Commonwealth cannot do. Now, we belong to a Commonwealth association but there is a larger association which is wider than what the CPA does. The CPA, I think, is shrinking whereas the Inter Parliamentary Union have a wider range, a bigger membership, more money at their disposal because there are so many developed countries there, whereas what we used to call the old 'white' Commonwealth, which is really the developed Commonwealth, carry the big load. The Brits, Canada, Aussie and New Zealand carry all of Africa, all of Asia, Asia Pacific more than anything else.

SO: There would be an argument for India, Singapore, Malaysia and South Africa to be doing much more.

BM: Right, and even when we thought of moving the Commonwealth, or a part of the Secretariat to India. Richard struggled with that.

SO: Billie, please if I could please ask you just in terms of the example of election monitoring mission in Uganda, and the very fact that the Museveni's party effectively stole the election. The Commonwealth wrote a critical report which was published, and yet it was comprehensively ignored.

BM: That's one of the things I wanted to say. There are too many things in the Commonwealth that are deliberative only, like the CMAG. It has not really responded to much of what has been reported by the CMAG in my time there. We took our remit seriously. It turned out to be another instance where the Commonwealth label did not work. The truth is, and I've asked myself this many times: if I were part of the head of Inter Parliamentary Union doing this - they do it, but selectively - would it have made a difference? I don't think so. I think it is the issue at hand. There is an attitude that, "We run our elections as we see fit. I'm not butting into that." Old boys club here again dominating.

SO: You've also made reference to the proliferation of other international bodies with their single-issue focus and agenda. Also the climate of international relations has changed: when you first became active in politics it was the time of the Cold War.

BM: Yes, and it was still a unipolar world, but now we are living in a multipolar world. Very different. New diplomatic connections which are non-Commonwealth. The English-speaking Caribbean has missions in China, India, the BRICS, all of the countries, Chile, Brazil; and the Commonwealth influence, the old friendships still work. You feel that you could call up a Commonwealth colleague and say, "Look, can you be helpful with this?" Whatever, but it's all below the radar.

SO: Before so many of those Commonwealth networks, those education and social networks were formed by going to UK universities.

BM: Still good, some things are. The Commonwealth scholarship program, Chevening, is a big, big thing. Right through the Caribbean for some people it's on a par with the Rhodes scholarship.

SO: Before the end of the Cold War, the Commonwealth had a USP in that it stood for democracy and development, racial justice and social justice. It had a clearer identity.

Billie, if I could just take you back to your view of CMAG? It was founded at the Auckland heads' meeting in 1995, which you attended.

BM: Yes, in fact I had to rush off from there to another meeting. So I was never part of the discussion about what was this CMAG going to be? But I remember that meeting quite well, yeah. We had great hopes that it would make a difference.

SO: Did you go down to the retreat?

BM: No I didn't, I didn't. I had to rush off to another meeting.

SO: I'm just wondering if you remember whether there had been any discussion, or any prior circulation of papers for a CMAG type structure in the run-up to Auckland?

BM: I do not recall.

SO: Were you surprised by what came out of Millbrook?

BM: No, there were papers and so on but we weren't sure ..., or at least I wasn't sure because I'd seen the heads in so many CHOGMs give short shrift to things that we thought were of critical importance. I just wondered if they were going to take on CMAG because the heads hadn't given sufficient remit to CMAG. I mean, what was the CMAG going to be? A group of foreign ministers? So it's not as though it was a subset of the heads, or a special committee of the heads. They gave it short shrift from day one.

SO: In terms of limiting your resources?

BM: We had no resources. The whole business of following it through became difficult. One visit was not enough, and there were no special staff at ComSec whose job it was to follow through on these things.

SO: So heads limited their time and attention to your recommendations?

BM: Yes, we weren't an item on the CHOGM agenda.

SO: How much of CMAG's work was deliberately, in the early years, directed towards military coups which primarily - not exclusively, primarily - concerned African countries? Was there a sense CMAG was an African problem solving entity?

BM: Then there was Pakistan.

SO: Of course there was also Fiji, and by 1999 Pakistan.

BM: That's right, but you see, remember the Commonwealth had already a history of disassociating people. You would be expelled from the Commonwealth.

SO: Yes, or suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth.

BM: Or suspended, right, and there was a little hierarchy going there. It worked quite well, countries accepted, nobody ever said, "You go to hell. We're out of the Commonwealth". Fiji's been in and out of the Commonwealth several

times and so have a few other countries. So that seemed to be working and some of the heads did take the attitude, “What is this CMAG, is this some kind of super thing?” They weren’t sure what the head of CMAG was supposed to do, and that was part of the first problem that we were not sure what our full remit was? The CPA would be the one, more than the CMAG, to help the country back to the point where it could apply for membership again.

SO: The Secretary General has to take mandates from heads to carry this forward, and obviously CMAG was a mandate. But you describe the creation of this new oversight structure as a knee jerk reaction, in that you didn’t know particularly what you were supposed to do?

BM: My take on it was that the heads were able to say, “Look, we put this thing in place”. They expected the CMAG to do what it was mandated to do. But the reality was the CMAG was never clear what its mandate was.

SO: Was there a cohort of heads who really did believe in it?

BM: I honestly cannot say. People didn’t want to discuss it, I found. I honestly cannot say, because when these issues, which were important ones, arose different heads would have different views about it, various regions within the Commonwealth would have different views about it. I’m trying to think if I can recall an issue. It was difficult because in a region if a country went crook, then sometimes the region would call around about that country to defend its position, or sometimes it would be a stand-off and the heads were rarely ad idem on any issue that arose on CMAG’s agenda.

SO: Okay. Was that also, in part, a product of the chairmanship of CMAG under Stan Mudenge?

BM: I was uncomfortable about that from the get-go. I thought ‘There’s money being spent.’ Not that we were given a separate budget. But from the very first meeting, I remember feeling “We’re not going anywhere with this. We’re not making a difference.”

SO: I know that, for instance, President Sani Abacha wouldn't even let CMAG into Nigeria despite repeated appeals that you be allowed to enter the country.

BM: Yes, yeah. The more spectacular, I remember, was Pakistan after Musharraf led a coup. Like with Maurice Bishop, you know, we were trying to say to him, "Look, you need to legitimate this coup. You need to have elections and just get back on course because the Commonwealth has a position on these things, you know. If you're going to be expelled, it wouldn't be the first or last time." It was clear to me. I went on that mission; it was just a group of about five. The foreign minister of Canada, who subsequently went back to academia.

SO: Lloyd Axworthy.

BM: That's right, a great friend. He said, "I'll give you a lift". We flew out of Ottawa on this great big 747 with like 12 of us just rattling around in it, and we went first to an airfield in Oxfordshire that was used during WW2; and then somebody was coming over from Bangladesh and from somewhere in West Africa, I think, to join us. In the end somebody didn't turn up. The security was very tight in Pakistan. I've never seen the like of it anywhere. Musharraf was in full military uniform. He received us in a very civil manner; we met with him once, twice, and he was promising that he would hold elections and that he was going to start at the municipal level, and a lot of talk. This meant he was going to entrench himself more and more, without a Parliament. I told my colleagues, who included Robin Cook, that it was clear that Musharraf was not going to do anything. The British High Commission there and the US Embassy were in lockdown. Even in Haiti, under house arrest, I never felt so closed in upon. I think it's just the feeling not only among some heads, but right through the hierarchy of the Commonwealth it was felt that we had a system in place and somehow CMAG did not seem to fit well into it. There were other organs of Commonwealth governments which would have dealt with outbreaks and coups, and issues like that in the past.

SO: Such as what?

BM: The CPA, and the heads themselves, who would be advised by the Secretary General. But they would do it individually. They would talk to each other and, you know, it was the 'old boys' network.

SO: The informal network, using the informality of the Commonwealth?

BM: Thank you. That was my take on it. That was how I felt for all the time that I was on the CMAG.

SO: So this Commonwealth venture into a more formal structure, with the setting up of CMAG...

BM: You never hear about it. It's so far below the radar that people don't even know if it still exists. You don't see any reports so you don't know what it's doing. I don't know when last it made a report, but I never felt that any report that we put before the heads was taken seriously enough. It never excited any discussion at the table.

SO: Please could I ask you: how did it operate? When CMAG – and you were of course vice chair - got together in the early years, was there a degree of an informal agenda, or that there was the informality of a lunch and then you went into the formal meeting?

BM: No, there was serious discussion. The agenda was quite formal and when we had my friend from Botswana in the chair, he was a former general ... He was very firm, a good chair, and when I demitted the CMAG he made a little speech. He said, "She's worth four men." I thought, "Please let the floor open up and take me away!" Again, I was the only woman and in that particular arena and you couldn't forget that you were the only woman there. In most of my political life, it didn't make a big, big difference but in the CMAG you were dealing with coups, counter-coups and all of this kind of thing, where people have really blotted their copybook badly in the Commonwealth. One or two of the countries of the Commonwealth which were a little suspect, hadn't come before the CMAG but had become members of the CMAG. That was very undermining, I think, to a large extent. All reporting back was to the Secretary General, who would communicate with Heads.

SO: How much also was it that members of CMAG were looking to their regional responsibilities and not necessarily to their Commonwealth responsibilities? So, for instance, when Ghana was arguing particularly on Nigeria, whether Sri Lanka was arguing particularly on the case for Pakistan?

BM: Some of that too, some of that too. That is why I thought rotation on CMAG was important. I became much disheartened when certain countries would find their way on to CMAG.

SO: How were they selected?

BM: Again, the heads in their caucus, and on another occasion would just declare it. Obviously they would have been talking very closely with the SG and so on. We normally met in London. I don't know how Barbados got on to the first CMAG. I can't think of anything that would qualify Barbados rather than any other country in the Caribbean. So it was difficult to tell. I suppose I was Foreign Minister with a certain amount of experience at the time, but I was still a fairly young foreign minister so I don't know.

SO: Was there any appreciable shift, as far as you could see, in terms of CMAG's organisation and approach, or remit, drive and energy when Don McKinnon became Secretary General?

BM: Yes, yes, much more structured.

SO: Because he had, of course, been on CMAG since 1995.

BM: Yes, much more structured, but at the end of the day, you know, I'm very much one for outcomes. You can spend your whole life working very hard with much output, but at the end of the day what is the outcome? You spent all of your energy on output, but the outcome which would have been your original remit, did it materialise? I think that CMAG was weak on outcome.

SO: Were you part of any discussion on whether CMAG should be having a wider remit beyond addressing military coups?

BM: Oh yes... All of those things were looked at, but we would always then come back to butt up on - this is a Barbadian phrase! We would always come back to the fact that there's quite a large conservative element, as you would know, in the Commonwealth. But we already manage these things, people were saying, 'People have a coup and they're exiled' and it is true because I was part of that when I was on the CMAG too. You would be working - and in CPA, we did a lot of work in CPA - you would be working under the radar preparing... like with Nigeria, or any other country; or Fiji for that matter. When you're expelled for several years and you come back, you don't have an election and a parliament just like that. The CPA would have been working below the radar all the while, readying people, training prospective clerks at the table and so on, and getting a country's electoral body into a state of readiness and being really psychic sometimes, you know. "Can we start to do this yet because we don't want to upset this very delicate situation? We don't want to excite people into thinking that we are managing things behind the scenes", and so on. So, several Commonwealth entities would be working together to ready countries for re-entry to full membership of the Commonwealth.

SO: Yes, the CPA, the Commonwealth Local Government Association, the Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association.

BM: Everybody would be doing their thing, and the ComSec would be like the puppeteer there. It worked for these entities. What is CMAG's remit? We kept asking ourselves that over and over again. The only remit we had was to produce a report which went to the heads. (And the heads met only every 2 years.)

SO: Which was not published.

BM: No, and it was not an agenda item. It was something that the heads were expected to be discussing when they went into caucus, where we were not. Nothing ever came back to us and nothing happened, at least not that I am aware.

SO: What did you think of Farooq Sobhan's idea when he was a candidate for the SG-ship, in the run up to the Durban heads of government

meeting in 1999? He argued CMAG should be reformed, but that its remit should be expanded - not simply that it should address military challenges to democracy, but that there should be other critical challenges to states, such as the environment, which CMAG should have the licence to bring...

BM: We supported that. Those of us who were on the CMAG supported that. But the heads did not.

SO: Had Farooq Sobhan been in discussion with you about these ideas?

BM: No, not to my remembrance. He might have talked to the chair, I don't know. I don't remember. I don't remember that there was any open discussion but we did have some on the CMAG who felt that perhaps if we had a larger remit that somehow we would get more attention, but we always came back to that element which felt this is not... you know, this would be sort of okay in one-on-ones and so on, you would hear this, if the machinery that the Commonwealth has to deal with these difficult, prickly issues which don't fall into any particular box works.

SO: How much do you feel, Billie, it was also a product of the fact that by the end of the 1990s the Commonwealth had become too large?

BM: Well that's another problem, because there were some heads who began to wonder how did Mozambique get into the Commonwealth?

SO: Indeed. I can see a certain logic of Mozambique's membership, in terms of being a critical Front Line state in the struggle against white minority rule in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and Apartheid in South Africa, and it was part of the SADC region; so there was a sense of Commonwealth engagement and regional common practice with Mozambique dating back to 1975. But Cameroon?

BM: This is it: Cameroon? These were countries that would have gone straight to CMAG's agenda. There was, I think, a little bit of a feeling - I'm going back in my memory now - that the Commonwealth was even then re-looking its direction and at the same time, you know, it was beginning to bulge out here

and take on something there. It was not structured. The Commonwealth started doing things and beginning to think about doing things without a big picture. I'm a big picture person. There are people in this life, and the majority of people I believe who focus well, they have an area of interest and influence and they focus well there, but if I can't see the big picture into which I fit, I have difficulty. I saw this, like Topsy, just grew and grew and growing, and at the same time we were asking where is the sense of direction for the 21st Century for the Commonwealth?

SO: Yes, but that was part of the on-going discussion - just as there had been a High Level Appraisal Review group at the end of the 1980s and 1990 on the Commonwealth and the role of the Secretariat. It was the same energy and commitment that Don McKinnon brought to the Commonwealth, to give it an express sense of purpose and direction that tried to take the Commonwealth towards being more of a trade association.

BM: They were the two, Chief Emeka and Don McKinnon, I think, of the most memorable SGs, although nobody will remember SGs today. The Commonwealth still had not come to a clear decision on where its place in the world was going to be, what its major influence could be in a new multipolar 21st century world. Yet still it was wanting to go off in these apparently new directions.

SO: How much of it was also, in your view, associated with the reduction of time for heads' meetings? That the time devoted to their meetings, the executive sessions and the retreat, was getting shorter and shorter?

BM: Yes but that was true generally speaking, for all kinds of meetings, CARICOM meetings, all kinds of meetings. I remember when it was a big event, on the first day you relaxed and you had a big 'do' in the evening and so on and then I was one of those who said, "No, no, no, no meetings that I'm chairing will happen like this again. You come on the evening before, and that is when we have the opening session, and your cocktails will come after that, but we start work at 9 o'clock the next morning. I want a full day's work. I have chaired meetings, I've been invited to a meeting just to chair the meeting. Dame Elsie Payne taught me this, the first Barbados woman scholar, and she said to me

one day (she sat on the University of the West Indies' Council for years). I was already in the Cabinet, and she said to me, "The hallmark of a good chair is that a good chair must bring a meeting to resolution. Preferably a good resolution, but it must come to some resolution." So when I chair everybody knows my style. Decisions in the minutes must be in bold so that at a glance we know if we have achieved anything at all. But I must bring the agenda to resolution. It doesn't mean that things don't get postponed to another meeting. If you can't get a quorum, you have a non-meeting. There was a feeling that the Commonwealth was getting too diffuse at a certain point, I remember that. Despite all of these attempts, and I think there were four that I can remember in my time, the Commonwealth looking at itself and everybody was looking towards the 21st century; the new technology was already making its presence felt. ComSec was very slow to come to that but then so were most organisations. It was almost... not quite a collision course, but running on two separate channels. I couldn't see how they were going to converge in the end.

SO: So is it precisely because it is such a diverse organisation that its energies were starting to dissipate?

BM: Yeah, reaching into too many things, thinking it could be all things to all people. It never was and it never was meant to be, I don't think, but not sufficiently recognising that perhaps there were smart partnerships that the Commonwealth could have forged; but it saw itself as so exclusive in the English-speaking world. You know, there was a time when the Commonwealth did have that structure but that was diminishing. People were looking to other organisations.

SO: Billie, please if I could ask: how much was it also that the Commonwealth, in terms of its structure, was also changing, just as there was a rising role for civil society organisations and the role of the rights based discourse?

BM: I am with you. I said to you just now that perhaps the Commonwealth could have reached out more to form smart partnerships, that is exactly what I mean: with civil society organisations. That is what I spend a lot of my non-government life doing, even now that's what I'm doing in the organisations

with which I am associated. I tried to hammer this home when I addressed the graduation last year at the Cave Hill Campus of the UWI, governments can't be everything to all people. There are things, all sorts of things that civil society is motivated to do and wants to do and can do better than governments, precisely because they're the people at the barricades where governments often cannot go; especially for small states like ours, we need to form these smart partnerships.

A perfect example: when I retired I said I wasn't going to chair anything again. I'd had enough of that for thirty two years in public life. I'm deputy president of the Barbados Association for Retired Persons. It's the biggest NGO in Barbados, 43,000 and growing because we're in an ageing society now. Everybody expects BARP, as it is called, to be all things to all people. We want this and we want that, and we want a big fancy headquarters and we want tennis courts and a running track and a gym. We can't afford it! You pay \$5 a month to belong. You can't afford it. What we needed to do was to form... and it took me years and an excellent chair now, first class man, with an HR background, (to say) you're not going to try to duplicate all of that. You are not going to be able to afford it on your \$5 a month, but we can form smart partnerships. So the Heart and Stroke Foundation give us special access to their gym for those with heart disease, the Diabetes Foundation likewise. We now have our own credit card and so on and so forth; and this is how we raise money for other programmes. So with an organisation like the Commonwealth, when it was perfectly aware that certain influences were diminishing and so on, and that it had to look to re-set itself within the international community, that might have been a time to force smart partnerships.

SO: Is it fair to say, though, that the idea of forming smart partnerships is also running into governmental resistance to reaching out to NGOs, precisely because there is a perception and dislike of NGOs because they are unelected organisations? Also, rightly or wrongly, civil society organisations are associated with a human rights discourse? So then they can be problematic: that there is not necessarily a constructive tension between governments and civil society, precisely because civil society groups push more for economic, social, human rights, which

may not accord to government ideas of what developmental states can recognise or permit.

BM: If that was the challenge then I think that the Commonwealth could have attempted it. I'm one who believes that they could have attempted it. It has a good track record on a whole range of matters, and in a manner of speaking the Commonwealth is civil society as well. In fact it's a hybrid, where there's huge government input; but in effect the Commonwealth does attempt to do a lot of things that governments by themselves either are not disposed to do, or don't do, or can't do.

SO: Billie, please can I ask you about your experience on the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative? You were a member of the advisor group for the CHRI. You said earlier that this is how you first met Richard Bourne, when the Commonwealth seemed to be languishing in the 1980s.

BM: Yeah, I think that was when I first met Richard. I can't remember exactly and I don't know what his memory of the first meeting is, but I think that was the first time.

SO: There was a crisis seminar in Windsor Great Park when he was saying, "The Commonwealth is dying. We need to re-energise it."

BM: This is it! I can remember the bedroom I slept in at Windsor Great Park because they said this was the bedroom of one of Queen Victoria's daughters.

SO: This was an initiative by Commonwealth activists, the committed and well connected with very good networks, individual journalists, lawyers, etc., able to draw upon that pool of human knowledge that exists within the Commonwealth, rather than having express endorsement from individual governments?

BM: Well, it didn't work as well as we thought!

SO: No? But hasn't CHRI achieved modest successes? It established its office in New Delhi by 1993. It does publish regular reports.

BM: But who knows? This is the thing. I mean, nobody has said to me or has emailed me to say, "Would you like to come onto our subscription list? Would you like to have the newsletter?" There're so many that I get and that I do read, but nothing out of the Commonwealth in that way.

SO: In part it could be said there's been a proliferation of news sources and now a radically different news agenda. Whereas before the Commonwealth was able to have its links to particularly well informed journalists and its clear, critical stance – e.g. against apartheid South Africa. But that era has now gone. The information age is now 24/7 and so there's a very different media landscape. It's also difficult for the Commonwealth if it hasn't got an attractive news story - that makes it a considerable challenge to get the message out. Patsy Robinson talked about this at the Witness Seminar on the Commonwealth Secretariat. She said when the Commonwealth and the Secretariat were opposing apartheid in South Africa this was a "sexy story": that there were media people banging on ComSec's door saying, "What does the Commonwealth think and do about this?"

BM: I remember that time, when people did want to hear what the Commonwealth's opinion was because it covered the whole spectrum of governments. You had the first world countries, third world, everybody had a voice within the Commonwealth. Some were louder than others but people respected and wanted to hear what the Commonwealth had to say. Nobody has asked that question now for a long, long time. People actually ask me "what is the Commonwealth?"

SO: I'm asked that frequently in England. People say, "The British Commonwealth? Didn't that die in 1949?" My answer is "Well, no, and it's not the British Commonwealth..."

BM: This is it, and there is this view that when Queen Elizabeth either abdicates or dies that the Commonwealth is going to die with her. And now that we see royals going to New York and Las Vegas and countries that are not

Commonwealth, the view is that the 21st century Commonwealth has not started to transmogrify enough. People have no idea what it could look like in the 21st century, and we're there.

SO: What is your assessment of the value and the contribution the Queen has played as head of the Commonwealth, to the association?

BM: She is the lynchpin. It's her. It's who she is, and she is faithful to that.

SO: So it is a combination of her charisma, her longevity in office, the hospitality that she provides?

BM: Everything. Everything, and she's done it as long as she could manage it. I can remember going to a heads of government in Coolum. That was when she said, "No more. It's too much for Philip and it's getting too much. Just something on the lawn and we're not going down in the flower forest and gullies. We can't do it anymore." Physically they were not able to do it anymore. When it was at its most brilliant, she was the centre of it. She epitomises the association. The Commonwealth is the Queen and this is part of the argument of countries like mine who are independent but remain in the Commonwealth. There are some who don't understand how that works. I'm a Republican, I have to say again, one lone voice in the wilderness, I don't think it's going to happen in my lifetime, but the Commonwealth has republics within it. Even her role is a diminishing one - not in her heart, not in how she views what her life's work is, but simply because as she grows older, she can't carry that load that she used to do. I think some of the young royals are into other things, and interesting things in my view.

There is no particular reason why the Commonwealth should resonate now with younger generations.

SO: In terms of the headship: I've heard ideas being mooted in London that rather than Prince Charles (who represented his mother at the Sri Lanka meeting) as the next Head, whether it should instead be the Duke of Cambridge; and that he and his wife, as a young family, should live in individual Commonwealth countries, to give a greater sense of unity and cohesion to the association.

BM: I don't think that's going to work. No, no, with respect to the royal family, if you're going to continue to have a monarch they need to be living in Britain, I would think.

SO: Was there much discussion when you were active in politics on whether there should be an elected Head of the Commonwealth after the Queen? Or if, because there is a Secretary General, it's not needed?

BM: Never heard the discussion. The Queen is a monumental head.

SO: She embodies the organisation?

BM: Yes, I've never heard that discussion. I have never participated or heard of that discussion. The discussions that I've heard more have to do with the role and function of the various institutions within the Commonwealth, some of which were withering away, some of which were not so much withering away as being overtaken by other entities. The old developed world Commonwealth now has a different geopolitical focus. Canada is Asia Pacific. Even before the United States recognised that they were really Asia Pacific as well, anything that touches the Pacific Ocean like Chile, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Western Hemisphere as we know it, these two great continents are Asia Pacific. The influence coming across the Atlantic is very much weakened. Now even the ACP is becoming doubtful about the future because if Europe transmogrifies into something that is not willing to have that appendage, and I would understand if they don't, then we are insignificant. We lost our opportunity when we tried to put together, in this hemisphere, something which we were calling the CBTPA; it was really a trade initiative and we were thinking that this was President Clinton's grand moment.

SO: The Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act?

BM: It went to hell in a basket. The BRICS were then rising and those like Chile and Brazil were saying to the United States, "We're sorry, this is really trade that we're talking about and if you continue to be protective of your industries and your agriculture and so on, it really does not lie in your mouth to tell us

that we are not to do likewise.” And it broke down there. Then in the wider WTO setting, the BRICS really went up on their hind legs, showing their strength. It always faltered on that, that the developed countries wanted to have it every which way. It’s still simply their way and they still wanted..., you know, you either have free trade, or you don’t have it and they were still very protective. The OECD when they were hammering poor little Barbados into the ground on the offshore sector there was one country in the Pacific, I forget which of the islands, of which they were saying, “You have a financial services sector and you are doing naughty things under the table”, and so on. I forget who it was at the time. It may have been PNG. That state replied, “We don’t have such a sector in our economy.” Of course, they were hammering us in Barbados too and we had to fight back and it was costly.

SO: Don McKinnon talked about this. He said that he was incensed that the OECD bureaucrats as non-elective officials were telling sovereign governments what they could and couldn’t do.

BM: Yes, yes, while they were doing it at the same time. Europe was doing it, the Brits were doing it too! Switzerland is well-known; even in recent times the courts have said, “We’ll allow a certain amount of exchange of information”, but maybe it’s more talk than anything else, because in that arena, the Commonwealth could not help us because some of the Commonwealth countries, the better off Commonwealth countries, became our not-friend, put it that way. The OECD was doing what they claimed that we were doing, in the Channel Islands and elsewhere, in Cayman, in Anguilla, the Turks and Caicos which are still territories. So it was difficult to point the finger.

SO: Indeed. Billie, in your view how much of the viability and the visibility of the Commonwealth is associated with the persona of the Secretary General? You made the comment at the start of this interview on the fact that Sir Sonny Ramphal is from the Caribbean region was enormously helpful.

BM: Yes, and the Caribbean felt that he would always be on our side, irrespective of the issue.

SO: Yes, what was your view of the qualities of Chief Emeka and Don McKinnon as Secretary General?

BM: Well, these were powerful men. They were the last great SGs. It was in my time when I was a Foreign Minister and therefore I had a lot of access and I could see them literally growing into their jobs and really defining the Commonwealth at a time when the Commonwealth was looking for definition. But again, you began to see then where Heads couldn't find common ground and sometimes had problems with the SG, and the SG is the one who is going to be drafting the agenda. But we began to see those little divisions and in the Chief's book (*An Inside History of the Modern Commonwealth*) he does make reference to some of that which we first saw... well, I first saw it on his watch.

What's happening now (on the rival candidates from the Caribbean) is just so horrible for the Caribbean. It is thought to be the Caribbean's "turn" so to speak, if there's such a thing. I've never had a lot of respect for that business of a "turn". You're looking for the best person for the job, but I think part of what is going on now has to do with the fact that the Commonwealth on the whole is grappling with the fact that a lot of its original influence - I wouldn't say 'power' but certainly 'influence' - is diminishing, and more rapidly now. It's a pity what's happening now because there's this terrible fight going on about who is best suited to be the next Secretary General. I don't know that it's going to make any real difference. Are the Commonwealth heads going to be paying much attention to who is the next SG?

SO: How would you explain the emergence of the three rival candidates from the Caribbean and the intensity of the rift that it opened up at the periphery of the November Cuba/CARICOM meeting?

BM: We have this all the time. We've had this as far back as I can remember. I know what it is to be awakened by Sir Shridath in a meeting where we were fighting for a certain position and he said, at 3 o'clock in the morning "You need to know X country has just sold out to Y country. We have to start doing some serious, serious lobbying at 7 o'clock tomorrow morning." Not new, not new. The Caribbean has great difficulty speaking with one voice. It is an age old complaint.

Just among the Anglophone Caribbean; and we know how powerful we are in our hemisphere when we speak with one voice. We are 15 countries in 34 in this region, not counting Cuba of course, but one hopes soon to do so. So if you want to be head of any institution in the Western hemisphere you have to aim to get all or the majority of the Caribbean vote. If you want to be head of PAHO [Pan American Health Organisation], if you want to be head of any of the inter-American agencies.

SO: Is it in part a problem of national political culture? Do people in power talk to people in the opposition? I know that that is not necessarily the case in Commonwealth African countries, but I'm trying to think why is it that there is such a feisty, national determination for an individual voice.

BM: Well, there are a lot of very big fish in very small seas, and it's sometimes easier I think to help inflate - I've got to be careful what word I use here - "egos", how people see themselves, how people see their countries. Sometimes it's not necessarily an ego thing in terms of the person, as much as the country. 'My country's a little country and I have to fight to keep its nose above the water'. Again, the old boys' club works there and sometimes it's in countries where the economies are very tiny, very fragile and they reach out to other countries. It's been difficult for small states like ours to get away from something which the Commonwealth helped to engender at its early stages: "We're here to help you. We're here to give you special and differential treatment." Then when you become more and more independent then, you know, there has to come a time when you've got to stand on your feet. We've had three, four Lome. There'll be no more Lomes. "This should have taken you to a place where you can fend for yourself..." But it doesn't and it's too easy to fracture. Even where we have tried to go to the greater Caribbean, the wider Caribbean, for example, the Dominican Republic, or Haiti, it's not been very successful.

SO: As my last question: what do you think about the future of the Commonwealth? Do you see it as a viable association? Do you think it needs to shrink so that it becomes more effective?

BM: I don't think it's viable as it is. I think that there are things which are still working well for the Commonwealth, they have to be brutally honest about what the reality is and what is viable in the early 21st century, and seeing where things are, the direction in which people are going now. I don't know how well the Commonwealth would survive in a multipolar world.

SO: Because it doesn't have sufficient definition, a sufficiently clear sense of purpose?

BM: In the unipolar world, you know, it had a centre which was holding but the centre is not holding now because people are looking beyond the Commonwealth to other non-Commonwealth capitals. I can remember as a young parliamentarian in legal matters, even when I was Secretary-Treasurer of the Barbados Bar Association, in legal matters you're looking for precedents. We used to look to Canada, to Sri Lanka in those days. Nobody's looking to Sri Lanka, I think, much nowadays. Australia and New Zealand, of course. Then you were looking for training. We have never had really a proper diplomatic training centre in the Caribbean. At the UWI campus in Trinidad, there is a programme but it never worked well and then we heard that Jamaica was going to have its own diplomatic training centre and Guyana was going to, but I've never heard further. So certainly in my 13-14 years as Foreign Minister of Barbados we always had to depend on Commonwealth countries. We would get a training opportunities in Australia from time to time. The one in Trinidad would do annual courses and we had such a small Foreign Service division, you know, we always get the shorter shrift. We could not afford to send an officer every year for a year. We asked for some short term three or six month attachments but they could not accommodate our requests. Australia used to offer a lot of good training: for chief of protocol you would send officers there. New Zealand would sometimes do other things, the Canadians would do other things in other sectors of the economy and they do great courses and attachments in parliamentary matters. We don't so much look to Westminster now.

SO: You look to Canada?

BM: To Canada because of its modern legal precedents, parliamentary practices and international financial and economic systems that are more relevant and

attractive to us. It is a major market for Barbados. I am deputy chair of the Electoral Boundaries Commission of Barbados, and every year in September there is a course that's offered, but it is not by the Commonwealth. It's an independent organisation which looks to electoral and boundary matters. One day I asked if there was a Commonwealth equivalent and was told no. So within the Commonwealth there's a sea change going on.

SO: How much do you think the creation and signing the Charter has been a positive thing for the Commonwealth? Or is it going to be problematic for countries that originally came to join the Commonwealth, and now it has evolved from the original association? Because of the Charter, there is a whole load of membership criteria which countries didn't originally sign up for?

BM: Well, I think it will do no better than the Charter that we signed at the Summit of the Americas many years ago and I don't know how well that is working in Latin America, or within the Caribbean, although we have good governance systems, but I don't know how well it's working. I think it's not worked recently in Central America and there are some countries in the Southern Cone and other parts of Latin America where it's not working particularly well. It's like the spirit of the thing, but it doesn't have power. But again, charters tend to be academic documents. I don't know that it would make a big difference. People just have what they consider to be more important and urgent priorities to which the Commonwealth does not speak and in fairness, never did. Trade is one.

SO: So can you see the Commonwealth limping along, because associations don't tend to die in a spectacular blaze of glory, or disaster? They generally become increasingly more redundant, until they're eventually wound up.

BM: Yeah, well we've canvassed all those things in the past. Would the Commonwealth do a deliberate downsize? People are doing other things in other regions and there's a cost involved and so on? What do people really still want? Do they still want the CPA? The Commonwealth Games, the scholarships, the technical assistance, skills transfer? But again, for a lot of these institutions within the Commonwealth, the leadership makes or breaks.

I don't think we've had the best leadership in more recent times in several of the institutions.

SO: How far do you think the Commonwealth is defined and made by its leadership?

BM: I don't know, I don't know what the solution is. I think to decentralise it is not going to be a solution. We've looked at that many times. The whole was an attractive aspect; when it met, you were meeting with the whole Commonwealth. You decentralise it then you meet with centres and maybe how often then we would be able to afford for the board to come together; CHOGMs are now what, every two years?

SO: Yes, and last two and half days.

BM: Right, you might have to go into every five years if you decentralise because these things become more and more costly. I remember in Coolum, it was soon after 9/11 and, I forget the name of the Foreign Minister then - he was a good friend too - and we stood at this big golf resort, we stood there one day and I was saying to him, "You know, we had offered to host 2002" - or 2003, whichever it was. Nigeria took it up and went to Abuja which was a total disaster. Prime Minister Arthur and I had to sit down and say, "Yes, we've looked at the numbers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We can't afford it." I asked the then Australian minister - I forget his name now - "What is this costing you?" He held my hand and said, "Billie, look up." The Queen was in a separate location as she always is, but the F-1 11s whatever they are, up there, guarding Mr Tony Blair and the Queen and all of the other heads. "I can't even give voice to the number." Barbados would have been small. I had my idea of where we would go for the caucus, we don't have an island offshore to go to, or any place. Barbados is so tiny, but I thought I would have done something quite exotic and so on and that would please the heads, but then I looked at the cost, and I remember Owen and I had to sit down with SG G McKinnon and say, "We're sorry. Sorry to spoil it - you know, because you have to apply years before - but we just are not going to be able to afford this." The security that we would have had to pay for, for the Heads and we're in small islands, porous coastlines. We just couldn't do it and Nigeria stepped in and took our slot; and so we never got to host.

SO: Were you still foreign minister at the Abuja meeting or had you demitted office?

BM: Yes, yes, I was Foreign Minister until I left office in 2008.

SO: Please can I ask you your view of the handling of the Zimbabwe issue?

BM: Mine? Or are you talking about the Caribbean, or the Commonwealth on the whole?

SO: The Commonwealth on the whole. I know about the background of the Troika; I've interviewed John Howard, and the attempts to encourage Zimbabwe to return to the ways of democracy and good governance.

BM: That was never going to happen.

SO: Exactly. You made mention to PJ Patterson as we were starting talking. He chaired that meeting at Abuja, and I just wonder if you remember much about the surrounding discussions.

BM: I can remember conversations with individual heads and I wouldn't like to name them. African heads, one who said to me, "My sister, I have tried. I have spoken to this man as best I can. He's not listening, he's not listening to us. He's not listening to us." This was a neighbouring country where people were coming across the Limpopo on a daily basis and would either be taken back in, like from South Africa by train or trucked in from surrounding countries, and who wanted to be helpful, but Mugabe wouldn't listen to anyone. He really does believe that he's God. He is a megalomaniac.

SO: Patsy Robinson's view was Robert Mugabe started to suffer from the longevity of office: that there is an insidious process of leaders surrounding themselves with sycophants. However, these individuals also become gatekeepers of information so a leader can start to have a very odd view of the world, precisely because they are not getting accurate information. Patsy argued there is another process at work, in which a leader comes to regard these 'advisers' as idiots, and the

accompanying conviction that the leader has to stay in office, to save the country from ‘these people’. Another way of looking at it is more malign: in which a leader and his surrounding coterie each need the other as protection against eventual prosecution justice for past crimes.

BM: Mugabe virtually decimated an entire tribe. Nobody ever talks about that.

SO: Why did the Commonwealth not talk about the Gukurahundi campaign?

BM: This is it. Nobody ever talks about it.

SO: I have asked two people who were at the Secretariat in the 1980s: “Why was this not talked about?”

BM: That has been my question always. Nobody talks about it. I never understood it, I still don’t understand it. You may be the only person that I’ve ever spoken to who’s taken it on board as an issue. It was like the great unspoken whole herd of elephants in the room, and nobody ever says this about them.

SO: One member of International Affairs Division, Moses Anafu’s argument was, “You have to understand that newly independent heads are particularly sensitive to criticism. So you have to be careful about how you introduce a degree of criticism on what might be going on in their country.” Then he also remarked that the information coming out of Zimbabwe seemed to be so muddled that they genuinely weren’t sure how much of this was South African destabilisation.

BM: I’m not buying any of that.

SO: Certainly South Africa was supporting an element of dissent in Matabeleland, so it was a murky picture. I thought, “But this does not absolve...”

BM: No, I’ve never bought into that. I’ve heard that talk and I don’t like it because my impression always is there were other Commonwealth countries where there was large-scale genocide. Nigeria was one. I remember I was a

student when they had a civil war. I remember when Rhodesia first had its problem with Ian Smith because I remember a Rhodesian student, who had to go back home; they couldn't afford to keep him there anymore. It broke his heart. I never forgot that. Of course, like students we were doing our thing and so on, but this (Gukurahundi) is unspoken and I don't think I ever will understand why that has not been nailed to his forehead. The kind of excuses I've heard! I remember one person once said, "You know, when his first wife, Sally, died, he turned into a different person". I said, "Please, please, this is a megalomaniac."

SO: The academic Stephen Chan's argument is Mugabe hasn't changed. The world around him has changed, but he has not.

BM: And Africa can't seem to bring him under control. They could do away with apartheid, Mandela could become a president, and Mugabe is unmanageable? And he wears a lot of respect.

SO: Just as a really final point on South Africa, after the end of apartheid in 1994: how far did you feel South Africa was putting back into the Commonwealth? After all the support the ANC had received in terms of solidarity, support, diplomatic engagement?

BM: We were excited because Barbados was one of the first countries to take a stand against apartheid South Africa. I remember as a little girl my father coming home for dinner, we'd be doing homework and he would be eating his dinner and talking to us about all kinds of things. In those days we used to get great round fat bottles with whole spiced peaches from South Africa in them and to this day peaches are my favourite fruit.

In summer vacation my mother would get big cans with jams and jellies all from South Africa and our Christmas great cake, as we called it, had to be set. You started doing that in June and a lot of port from South Africa was poured into the jar. My father who was a Member of Parliament at that time explained to us that there would be no more of that. There'd be no more, nothing made in South Africa would be brought into this house and that Barbados was in solidarity with the movement in South Africa to free South Africa from apartheid, and it had to be explained to us and no more peaches.

That's one of my earliest memories. Barbados was one of the first countries to put a trade embargo. Of course, you're not helping people in South Africa and so on, but that's what the government of the day did and we felt very strongly. That's how we were brought up in my generation. So when freedom came eventually and this first election, I was so excited I stayed up all night listening to everything. We thought the world has now found its right place and somehow what is happening in South Africa is going to change all of Africa and Africa's going to find its feet, and become very powerful again. It didn't happen.

SO: The tragedy is, of course, that excitement and great change in South Africa was happening, at the same time that genocide was happening in Rwanda.

BM: Indeed, Rwanda's done very well though. Incredibly well.

SO: So, on South Africa then, there were great hopes that South Africa would be put back into the Commonwealth?

BM: Yes, and we thought it was going to do... great things would happen and then...

SO: It didn't materialise?

BM: No, it was taking a long time, but I well remember when President Mandela was invited by our heads to come to one of our CARICOM Heads' meetings. It was in Soufriere in St Lucia and again they invited me into their caucus with him, and he said to them... I'll never forget it, he said to them, "You're so fortunate in these islands where you live. Do you know what is my greatest concern about my country? Clean water." Clean water! Here you have to just pump it up and drink it! He spoke about pollution up-stream in many of the big rivers. He said, "You would think it looks as though we have such tremendous natural resources, but you know the mining industry has caused poisons in the water." He said that in terms of basic infrastructure and so on, there's so much work to be done. I felt, overwhelmed. I said, "Oh my goodness. I thought they were at least where we were at, but we're small islands seeing things in microcosm. But that was his great fear and concern,

harnessing natural resources and putting basic infrastructure in place. And then of course the first time I went to Cape Town and saw the townships there, I had a better understanding of what he was talking about. I think that the South African position on HIV/AIDS upset a lot of people in the Caribbean because we are second only to Sub-Sahara Africa in terms of our HIV/AIDS prevalence.

SO: I was reading before I came here about your HIV/Aids work, and promotion of sex and health education.

BM: There you go. I think we've covered all our bases. I wanted to say something positive though about Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Association, and the Lawyers Association. They are two separate associations, but I ask questions of a judge who is a dear friend and who is very much engaged in both of these associations and his comment was that these organisations were among the best in the Commonwealth, particularly in terms of technical assistance, skills transfer, some elements being available on websites. Commonwealth managed trips and Judges' Association meetings can be very useful and he thought especially to African judges. The Commonwealth Lawyers Association, he says - and I trust his judgment implicitly - is more like a professional body, not unlike the International Bar Association and other such associations. In time it might be overtaken by people going to other associations with a wider breadth than the Commonwealth. Small states, we talked about that: scholarships are important, technology transfer, bilateral agreements, but the special and differential treatment that we used to get is declining too, and that has to do with the availability of money. Trade and investment relations, economic development, generally speaking. Although I can't speak with too much particularity on those things.

SO: Did you have a view on the Visa Project? I know that there had been a suggestion by the Ramphal Institute, of an idea to see whether Commonwealth businessmen who could get speedy, easier visa access to Commonwealth countries?

BM: I think that's been overtaken by the fact that there are so many other ways that you can do that, and there are different countries that are doing different things. But I am not well up on that at all. There are things that are open to us

in the Caribbean: there is access to the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, the IMF, EU, ACP. The Commonwealth, because of its structure, cannot be very helpful to us on those issues and the economic issues are of maximum significance in these opening decades of the 21st Century. This was one where I thought that... [looking through papers.] No, I was saying here that with the lesser influence of the SGs, the changeover of the Secretariat, the voice of the Commonwealth is too muted now in the international community, too often invisible on exclusive Commonwealth issues of importance and more so on non-Commonwealth international or global issues by definition. You don't hear the word "Commonwealth". The Commonwealth connection is not the connection that is made, but you asked too about CMAG and Latimer House Principles. There are new constructs of legislation emerging that are taking their initiatives from countries other than Commonwealth countries. Less and less the sphere of influence.

In countries like ours in the Caribbean where our legislative and governance processes are still in good name, the Commonwealth remains the overarching body to which we would look first for guidance. Still they hold on to Commonwealth practices and principles. Commonwealth meetings are of lesser importance now, because there are speciality areas and other places to which one goes to meetings with a wider than Commonwealth membership. So I think some of those meetings are becoming smaller, some are disappearing.

SO: Yes, and the very fact that the Secretariat is dramatically diminished in size, that they can't provide the technical assistance and research facilities in the way that it did before.

BM: I've always thought that we have good people at the Secretariat. I am not sure since the era of the Chief and Don McKinnon. I don't know what's going to happen. In fact, unless they really make an excellent choice for SG, this may be the beginning of the end.

SO: Well, there's a lot riding on this Malta summit coming up in late October/November 2015.

BM: It could make or break the Commonwealth. The Caribbean is divided and they may well find that some other region may put a name forward.

SO: Billie, very many thanks for such a wide ranging discussion. I am very grateful indeed.