VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Carl Wright (Part One)

Key:
SO: **Sue Onslow (Interviewer)**
CW: Carl Wright (Respondent)
s.l.: sounds like

SO: **This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Carl Wright, Secretary General of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, in Northumberland Avenue on 31st January 2013. Carl, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by saying, please; where does the CLGF sit, within the broader framework of Commonwealth associations?**

CW: It's a pleasure to meet up and make a contribution. We're called what's termed a 'Commonwealth Associated Organisation' which is relatively new terminology that came about after the Coolum CHOGM; and it's distinct from civil society on the one hand, which covers a number of professional and NGO bodies in the Commonwealth, and the IGO or the Intergovernmental Commonwealth, like the Secretariat and the Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning. What it really means is that we are quasi-governmental. If you look at my own membership, it's primarily elected local councils and governments which are part of government. Of course, we are also a bit hybrid in the sense that we have ministries of local government as our members as well, so we do bring in central government in our structures. If you take my board for which I am responsible, we have senior ministers even at cabinet level as well as elected mayors and council leaders. So it straddles central and local government. We don't have formal IGO status. And associated status, which is similar to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, for example, means we have delegations at CHOGM; we have other closer links with the Secretariat than civil society bodies.

SO: **So those other civil society bodies really have much closer affiliation with the Commonwealth Foundation than you yourselves. You, as you say, are quasi-governmental.**

CW: Exactly. We have good working links with the Foundation, but we don't get any support or subsidies from them and we're quite separate from them.

SO: You say that this emerged at the Coolum CHOGM; were you part of a particular move to encourage this development?

CW: Yes. We'd been lobbying it for quite a while. Since we were set up in 1995, which was after Auckland, and we got endorsement at the Auckland CHOGM, we had to readjust the civil society status and we've always had the view that we were different - not necessarily better or worse but just different in our structures and our functioning, being quasi-governmental. So we were lobbying for this for quite a while and we were pleased that it got some significant recognition after Coolum, although it's an on-going process and we're currently still trying to develop that status and relationship further.

SO: When you say 'we', obviously you're speaking of your particular forum but was there particular governmental backing for your project?

CW: Yes, because as I mentioned we had ministers on our board, so there were some major Commonwealth countries, whether it's India or the UK at that time. So of course we did get some support from our central government members of the board.

SO: So this is not the classic 'ABC countries' within the Commonwealth initiative; this had a much broader input then at diplomatic level across the Commonwealth?

CW: Absolutely. Like any Commonwealth body, I hope we reflect the modern Commonwealth which is very much multi-cultural and even the small states have a significant role in our structures.

SO: Were the small states particularly supportive of this initiative?

CW: Well, I think you can't totally divorce it from things that happen outside the Commonwealth. We were part of a broader international movement. Maybe if I just put it into context: the major reason why we were set up back in the mid-90s was as a response to some developments which were beyond the Commonwealth. One was the whole move towards multiparty structures after the end of the Cold War and changes in Africa and elsewhere; and very closely linked to that is what's called 'public sector decentralisation', which really meant local empowerment and bringing things more down to grassroots, reflected in having multiparty local governments and also more decentralised power. We were part of that wider trend but obviously within a Commonwealth context.

SO: Yes. So I'm just wondering whether there were any particular countries, any particular leaders of countries who were significantly supportive of this particular initiative.

CW: I think we certainly had strong support from some of our African members which we were very close to, with some of the newer members like South Africa in the early days. I would certainly say some of the Caribbean countries like Jamaica, but also we had good links with some of the ABC countries; Australia certainly was always very supportive. In fact the original funding for the organisation of course inevitably came from two of the richer countries, Canada and the UK, but it soon broadened out from that.

SO: Was there any resistance; were there those who felt that this was in fact a digression from where the Commonwealth's energy and focus should be?

CW: Oh, it took a lot of time and I think there still is resistance. It's by no means totally settled. I think the traditional diplomatic set and I worked at the Secretariat previously at diplomatic level. I think they were prone to be a bit nervous about other actors coming onto the stage and I'll include national governments within that. The foreign offices don't like their ministers of local government, which are our members, interfering in international affairs. So, I think it did take a lot of time for people to get used to the idea that there is a broader agenda than just the traditional diplomatic set.

SO: Yes. But do you now have delegation status at CHOGM so that it's not simply observer status; you have a degree of formal representation?

CW: Yes. We can sit in, it doesn't go all the way, we can sit in at, for example, the meeting of the Foreign Ministers although there are some sensitive items which we are excluded from in the discussions. We don't participate in the actual CHOGM executive sessions but those are pretty restricted anyway. But the great thing is it gives us access as delegates to all the delegations, and we can circulate papers and have interactions with the people there. So, I think we'd like to see it develop further. For example, we've been arguing for the right to make a submission to the Foreign Ministers and report on our activities, which we currently don't do.

SO: I was about to ask you, are you allowed to make written and oral submissions to the Foreign Ministers?

CW: Written, yes. Oral, there has been a precedent once but it's been a bit *ad hoc* so we're trying to make that a bit more of a regular feature in the future.

SO: You mentioned South Africa: how much has South Africa proved a test case for you?

CW: It was always very important for us and one reason that it was important is that South Africa, when it got its freedom in '94, leapfrogged a lot of democratic models. One of the areas which really emerged very strong, certainly in the African context, was local democracy and local government decentralisation. They're able to go forward to quite a progressive model, and we did advise them a little bit at the time of that transition. For example, in their constitution I believe they refer to 'spheres of government' which is a totally different concept from the traditional levels of government. You have a level of local or provincial and central government which implies hierarchy and one being more important than another, whereas the concept of 'spheres' implies that each sphere of government, whether local, provincial or central has its own areas of responsibility. Central government might have responsibility for foreign affairs and trade, but local government might have responsibility for health, sanitation and other key issues, although there's obviously always some overlap.

SO: So you were providing advice on drafting of documents?

CW: Yes, I think at that time we gave a little bit of input and provided one or two experts, certainly on the local government thinking when the South African new dispensations were being formed.

SO: I know that public sector service delivery has been a consistent and on-going problem in South Africa; is this something for which they have drawn on your advice, or you have provided influence if asked, since '94?

CW: Yes, we have engaged with them strongly and I know there are still huge problems on account of all sorts of reasons. I think sometimes it's a little bit overplayed in my view. I was looking at some of the statistics on South Africa and actually there has been huge improvements in housing and health and sanitation, but of course, like a lot of countries, there's been an influx of populations and migrants, and I was recently in Johannesburg looking at some of the huge slum areas around Johannesburg, but one has to see it in context. So, the answer is 'yes', we have been engaging with them, we are engaged with them and we have a small office in the local government headquarters in Pretoria, in Tswane, which is a regional office; so we do work very closely with our South African colleagues but it's in fact for the whole region not just South Africa.

SO: So, is this a question of them drawing upon your skills, advice and training, or that you as a forum can only be reactive when one of your members solicits help?

CW: It's a bit of both. I think we do take a proactive view as well, and I think particularly on policy formulation. Maybe just jumping ahead a little bit, one of the achievements which we're pleased about was something we got out of the Malta CHOGM in 1995 which was called the Aberdeen Principles on Local Democracy and Good Governance, which were originally agreed by our membership and endorsed by CHOGM. They were endorsed by subsequent CHOGMs and now form a part of the new Commonwealth Charter. And what's important about these principles is that we are trying to use them in a proactive way in getting our members in different countries to observe those principles, to follow them. And even at the level of CMAG, the Ministerial Action Group, where, for example, we recently – at the last meeting – raised the principles in the context of the Maldives. So, they're very much operational principles, a bit like the Latimer House Guidelines.

SO: So implementing then the Aberdeen Agenda is very much part of your mission statement?

CW: Very much, very much. We have three core areas. One is promoting local democracy and good governance, which is the advocacy work. Second, is international knowledge sharing, which covers promotion of best practices in local government decentralisation, and the third is capacity building, which is helping our members - the kind of thing you touched on a minute ago, in improving their own capacity, training and so forth. So those are the three prongs of our work.

SO: I know that you, in 2006, elaborated the Aberdeen Agenda into the Kampala Agenda; is this just being regional specific and related to

Africa with its particular challenge of urbanisation and population growth?

CW: Yes, we do quite a lot at regional level and we do link up at regional level. Even at national level we've tested the Aberdeen Agenda in a number of countries, like Uganda and Tanzania, to see how far it actually translates into national legislation and national principles, so it's just another way in which we try to make use of it, in this case on a regional level.

SO: Yes. You used the word 'lobbying' earlier, but I know that, after all, as a quasi-governmental association, lobbying can be a sensitive issue. It raises the question, how proactive should you be? Should you be reactive, and guided by your membership or by your board? Obviously there's a constructive tension between those two points.

CW: Sure.

SO: Where would you place your organisation on the spectrum of being establishment/reactive/proactive?

CW: Well, we have a very supportive board and I think, certainly in the past, they've always endorsed our political initiatives. But I would say, on a scale of one to ten, where ten is the most proactive, I think we're definitely at the seven or eight end of being proactive in, I'd say, 'advocacy' rather than lobbying! *[Laughs]*

SO: What's your view then of the fate of the Charter that was presented by the EPG to Perth?

CW: I think it wasn't the happiest experience but I think the final version that's now emerged is much more concrete. We were not very impressed by some of the earlier drafts but the one that's been adopted, for example, does have reference to the Aberdeen Principles which the earlier drafts didn't. So from our maybe slightly more narrow point of view, we think that the current Charter is a much more relevant document.

SO: Had you anticipated the resistance that the 2011 Charter encountered at Perth; you said that you had been unhappy with the earlier drafts. Had you gone to Perth with *[laughs]* shall we say, something of a sinking heart thinking, "This isn't gonna fly"?

CW: I suppose we were more focused on the other EPG recommendations than the Charter per se if I'm absolutely honest, and I'm not sure we'd seen the final draft at that time so I think when we did see it, as I said a minute ago, we weren't terribly impressed. We did some representations to make sure that things like Aberdeen were inserted into the new drafts.

SO: Carl, just speaking more broadly of your personal experience, your involvement in trade union activity and workers' rights, solidarity in promoting political rights associated with those: how much would you say that you yourself have acted as a quasi-diplomatic actor over the course of your professional career?

CW: A lot of my Commonwealth colleagues think I'm probably not very diplomatic although I did have, as I say, a stint of about six years as a diplomat at the Secretariat at diplomatic level, at least as Assistant Director. I guess I've probably always been a bit influenced by my activist past, if you like, but I think as you obviously progress into more governmental structures you have to temper a little bit of that and I guess sometimes my colleagues now think I'm being too diplomatic *[laughs]* so maybe it'll change as I get older!

SO: An uneasy balance to reach!

CW: Uneasy balance, yes.

SO: But from your insights when you went to the Commonwealth Secretariat, how as an entity has it evolved; obviously as an organisation it takes its tone from the persona, the particular authority of office and the selected initiatives that individual Secretary Generals push forward -

CW: Sure.

SO: - and any organisation takes its tone from the top. How would you reflect upon those aspects from your time there?

CW: Well, I was there at a very sort of heyday time. I was recruited by Sonny Ramphal who obviously is very highly regarded. I then served under Emeka Anyaoku, who's a good friend, and of course that was the tail-end of the unfinished business, the heyday on South Africa. And I was very involved in some of those issues, both in my trade union work and then subsequently at the Secretariat. In fact the last thing I did there before I left in '94 was to help organise the first post-apartheid big International Donors' Conference together with the UN in Cape Town, in late '94, which was a joint UN-Commonwealth initiative. I was involved in the Mozambique Fund and some of the work on Namibia and other things, so it was a very heyday time if you like. It was a time when the Secretariat had significantly more resources and staffing than it does now so it was, in that sense at least, stronger.

Anyaoku of course made a powerful transition I think, to moving the agenda forward to looking at things like elections, human rights and democracy and I think that's resulted in the creation of CMAG, and I guess in some respects also support for organisations like the Commonwealth Local Government Forum as an actor. So, I think it was a very vibrant time. Inevitably I think there've been two developments since then when I look back on the last 10 - 15 years maybe. One is of course reduction in the resources and ability to access the funding and other things which it has to deal with. The second one, I think again I come back to something I said right at the beginning, I think it's difficult to see the Commonwealth in isolation from other international bodies. If you look what's happened especially since the economic crisis of 2008 and the world recession, a lot of international organisations have taken a real battering, whether it's the UN, the European Union's in crisis, and I don't think some of the difficulties the Commonwealth is currently facing as an international institution you can see in isolation from those broader international trends. It's part of a, to my mind, very worrying reversal of some of the post-war consensus on international cooperation. So I just wanted to put it in that context.

SO: Picking up on this point, in that the Commonwealth is a unique organisation: as Derek Ingram has described, it has the extraordinary ability to reinvent itself at times of crisis, it doesn't have the more formal structures of other international bodies and institutions and has not been identified as being particularly culpable in the global financial crisis. So, I identify what you're saying, that this is a commonality of crises for international organisations, but the Commonwealth surely has been further away from the epicentre of eruption?

CW: Yes that's true, but the commitment to international work I think has decreased in all countries and not only Britain which is perhaps the obvious example, although the present government of course places more emphasis on the Commonwealth. I think you can say that there's been perhaps a declining interest as opposed to greater cooperation at regional level within South Africa, within South Asia, within East Africa, and I think again the Commonwealth has to reinvent itself. We're trying to do it by operating more at regional level, having regional offices, regional programmes linking up with regional institutions. I think you're right; the Commonwealth is very good at reinventing itself. I think the EPG exercise is another example of that.

SO: But when you're talking about having regional offices, for instance in Southern Africa you have SADC, you have the East African Community, in West Africa, ECOWAS which is of course extraordinary in its military willingness but also of course it's an economic foundation. So the Commonwealth is fragmented more at local level; entities such as ECOWAS include non-Commonwealth national governments. So, is the Commonwealth now being overtaken by other forms of regional organisation?

CW: Well, that's the danger and I think we have to address that danger and the way we are doing it of course may be slightly easier at our level than at a purely governmental level for the Secretariat. The way we're doing it is, for example, in SADC and East Africa where most of the countries are, the Commonwealth is working with those structures and we're helping the SADC countries develop a forum for local governments in SADC. We've recently had a meeting in Arusha where we brought together the East African countries and they've set up an East African local government forum which is designed to input into the EAC, so we're actually working with our members in those regions to further their regional objectives as a Commonwealth institution bringing expertise, bringing know-how, and linking up maybe with other partners like the UN.

SO: That's much more of a 'bottom up' approach.

CW: Yeah, which in a sense, is easier than if we were doing it, as I say, obviously at the Secretariat level.

SO: Yes. This fits in very much with, as you say, the drive for good governance as providing a key adjunct then to development.

If I may go back to your personal points about your trade union activity and your involvement while you were Assistant Secretary at the Secretariat leading up to the UN Commonwealth aid conference post-

apartheid. Trade union activity in South Africa was a key part of the struggle, with the South African trade union organisation looking very much to Solidarity in the 1980s in Poland as its particular model. Was also your point of input of trade union support fundamentally different from those trade unions with a particularly left wing agenda, in terms of political transitions in South Africa?

CW: It wasn't I would say necessarily left wing; it was more fundamentally liberationist if you like and supporting freedom movements. If you go back a bit further, if you look at the history of the independence struggle in most Commonwealth countries, whether you're talking about India or whether you're talking about Kenya or Ghana. A lot of those had a trade union base because trade unions were where political leaders could be active, trade unions and ironically local government I guess. Those were the two elements prior to liberation where political leadership could express itself and marshal support, so I think it's not necessarily a left/right thing. It was helping, and in Zimbabwe as well, the freedom struggles of those countries. Obviously subsequent to that you can argue about which direction the country takes. And maybe just another point: I do think the things are very closely linked and we had a very good rapport with Sonny Ramphal when I was working in the Trade Union Council. Sonny was very gracious at a recent meeting of the CA/B when they looked at the anniversary of the Eminent Persons Group that went to South Africa. And if you look at the record he very graciously - I think it's also in his biography - attributed that idea to the Commonwealth Trade Union Council because we originally came up with the idea of linking negotiations with sanctions. Then Bob Hawke, who was one of our close friends at the time, and Salim Salim of Tanzania took it up with at CHOGM and it evolved from that, and Sonny should have the main credit for making it happen but he did attribute the original idea to us.

So what I'm trying to say is that there's always close linkages between certainly political ideas. I think you can't say there's a strict diplomatic sphere and an NGO sphere and I think the two are very closely linked, especially in the Commonwealth. I think one of the Commonwealth's strengths is it's able to draw on these outside actors, whether it's trade unions, whether it's the magistrates, whether it's local government, whether it's broader NGOs, for its work and it's been open to that and I think one of its strengths is that it does have the door open to those influences.

SO: So, in complete contrast to the diplomatic and bureaucratic silos that seem to operate in, for instance, Whitehall, the Commonwealth is altogether a different beast?

CW: Absolutely and I think that's one of its greatest strengths. Maybe that's something where certainly sometimes Whitehall or the more traditional diplomats haven't understood the value of that and certainly in some of the ABC countries.

SO: To take this a little further: in those countries which have, shall we say, limited manpower, a relatively small bureaucracy, small administration just by virtue of a small national budget, can Commonwealth affiliation and networks help to substitute for straitened national budgets which limit how much governments are able to spend on their foreign ministry, treasury, or law ministry?

CW: I'd have thought it can't ultimately substitute for full national sovereignty but it can certainly make a significant contribution and assist the process. I think particularly in small states where there's very limited capacity I think that's the case, and even in regional bodies - we referred earlier to SADC and ECOWAS - some of those structures are quite weak in many ways and the Commonwealth can offer a lot of expertise and experience in helping even those regional intergovernmental structures.

SO: Carl, you were at the Commonwealth Secretariat for six years?

CW: About six years from '88 to '94.

SO: Yes. Were you a governmental appointee while you were there?

CW: Well yes, in a sense. Not appointed by any government, I was recruited more independently, directly from the Commonwealth Trade Union Council.

SO: Yes, and you've talked about it being a particular time of change at the end of apartheid in South Africa, and referred to your contribution in terms of the nuts and bolts of transition and then the aid conference afterwards. You also stressed Chief Anyaoku taking the Commonwealth in a different direction, emphasising good governance through 'good offices'. Could you comment on his particular style and approach as a diplomat?

CW: Well, of course he's always very much an insider because he came through the Commonwealth Secretariat ranks, apart from a short time he had as the Foreign Minister of Nigeria, so he was somebody who knew the system, who knew the Commonwealth structures intimately well, and was I think somebody who was very sensitive to concerns for example in Africa, and his own country Nigeria caused him much grief at this time. So I think he was very suited for that task because he was aware of some of the fears that might be involved in external interference in internal affairs, and also had the knowledge of how far the Commonwealth could take things.

SO: Yes. As you say, the particular sensitivities of a high ranking Nigerian diplomat as Commonwealth Secretary General who was challenged by the particular problems in his own country: his good offices and the discreet diplomacy that he is able to exercise depends precisely on it remaining discreet. But then the Commonwealth is caught in a bind because it cannot in fact take credit for what it's genuinely doing.

CW: I think in a sense it's an evolution. In 1994 there was still a huge amount of goodwill from the whole South Africa and Zimbabwe exercises, so the Commonwealth was in a very strong position to push forward its agenda and I think CMAG was a revolutionary thing. Very few, if any, intergovernmental bodies have that mechanism to expel or suspend members and criticise them in the way the Commonwealth does. So I think maybe, and then perhaps following the establishment of CMAG, there was this long period when it only restricted itself to military regimes; but now, since Perth, very recently the agenda is much broader so one would hope that the next ten years would see a much more active engagement in all areas of political and human rights issues.

SO: I know Chief Anyaoku had conceived of CMAG, of good offices, long before the Auckland CHOGM, but was the crisis over Ken Saro-Wiwa the tipping point which enabled the adoption of CMAG?

CW: Yes, and I think it was the tipping point. Mandela was very upset and all the rest of it which you know has been documented, so I think that gave him the opportunity to move it all forward and maybe have a bit of a breakthrough on it.

SO: If it hadn't been for that do you think it would have been even harder?

CW: It would have been even harder, I think. In a sense the thing got a bit bogged down in subsequent years: obviously there was Pakistan, there was Fiji and so on, but in a sense it could have done more in the last few years maybe.

SO: But inevitably initiatives go in stops and starts and spurts and -

CW: Sure, and then many countries got nervous about it and then they resorted to closed door diplomacy which I think now is probably a little bit discredited.

SO: Yes, I think so. Where do you advise me to start to go to look to tease out the diplomacy?

CW: In what sort of sense?

SO: This project is designed to open up, and really to explore the nuances of good offices, to explore the *role* of the Commonwealth as an assistant to peaceful reconciliation, to conflict management and mediation.

CW: Sure.

SO: How do you advise me to start to tease out actually what was going on, as you say, around the Pakistan issue, around Nigeria's suspension but then return to the Commonwealth, around the Fiji issue, around the Maldives?

CW: Well, it depends how far you want go back I guess. I think maybe one thing that hasn't been documented quite so much, apart from the EPG, is some of the transition that took place with South Africa and Namibia, which obviously I was particularly involved with so I suppose I'm focusing on that. Then of course what's happened since then. Just one example: one area I had responsibility for directly is that we must have organised something like a dozen or more workshops and seminars in places like Zimbabwe in the period '88 to '94, for people from the ANC from outside South Africa, SWAPO and their counterparts like UDF and COSATU from inside the country. They were meeting in Zimbabwe there to decide their strategy, to develop their ideas. This was in the period when it was very rough before De Klerk liberalised things. Then in the subsequent transition period, which was highly critical between '90 and '94. So I think this was important at a very practical level. Just as one concrete example: Cyril Ramaphosa, on his first foreign trip - I think it was something I'd organised in a meeting in Zimbabwe when he was wearing his trade union hat at that time. So, what I'm really trying to say is that the Commonwealth did a lot of things behind the scenes, facilitating

transitions and movements, the same with Namibia, and it can play quite a powerful role in that sense.

SO: How much did the Zimbabwe experience provide a key learning curve for the Commonwealth? I know that Sonny Ramphal really provided the diplomatic backing for the Patriotic Front – both ZANU and ZAPU - precisely because he feared that when as liberation movements, they went into negotiations with the British about transition they didn't have the administrative skills, the knowledge or the capability. They were liberation fighters, they weren't toughened diplomats. They knew they wanted power, but they didn't know necessarily quite what they wanted to do with it.

CW: Yeah.

SO: It strikes me that as you're describing here, the advice, the workshops, to COSATU and to UDF was precisely along the same lines.

CW: That, and also to allow them to meet with their counterparts in exile and to get the two together and agree common policies because at that time they were quite divergent in many areas. I think it did cement a common position which then meant that when De Klerk and others came to negotiating they had, there was a clear negotiating position.

SO: So, it's a question of knowledge and skill transfer but also that they shouldn't be operating within their own silos and so the 'in-xiles' and the 'ex-iles' were genuinely going to be speaking.

CW: Exactly and I feel in a sense the Commonwealth could play a bigger role, jumping ahead to the future maybe in some post conflict situations. Burma would be a classic case where I think the Commonwealth should get engaged.

SO: It remains to be seen.

CW: Indeed! *[Laughs]*

SO: Going back then to the Commonwealth as a critical assistant in helping to develop formal policies from which then South African liberation movements could negotiate with the National Party, did it accelerate between 1988 and '94? Was there a particular high point, so once Mandela was released in February 1990 then the Commonwealth necessarily was obliged to take a back seat, or did the Commonwealth continue to act as a key adviser?

CW: No, we very much continued to act although the agenda changed. There was obviously a lot of interaction to help on the negotiations in providing some information. I was less involved with that directly myself, but the area I was responsible for was the whole issue of how would you facilitate black empowerment after '94, which would affect obviously the public sector where it was totally white dominated. It would affect the schooling and the education system, local government, you name it. And one thing we did was we did a fairly intensive exercise at that time at the Secretariat which resulted in

something you may have seen called the Report on Post-Apartheid Human Resource Development.

SO: No, I haven't.

CW: Which is worth looking at because it was published and it was an interesting exercise. It was one of these group things where we had some prominent Commonwealth experts but for the first time we also had some South African experts, a black South African and white South African who were both respected by the respective communities. That report really got to grips with how do you create affirmative action in the civil service, how do you address inequalities in education, and it was quite a broad holistic report but it provided I think some valuable guidelines for the ANC government to manage the transition post '94. And it was also the basis of what I mentioned earlier which was a joint Commonwealth UN Donors' Conference which mobilised resources for the immediate post-apartheid transition, and that report provided the framework of that event which happened in December '94 in Cape Town.

SO: So, you were primarily responsible for drafting that?

CW: Yes.

SO: Were there tensions between the Secretariat and the varying political actors in South Africa, such as the SACP with its particular agenda of driving forward a socialist transformation – the 'national democratic revolution'?

CW: Sure.

SO: I appreciate that the Secretariat was providing assistance and advice in that they should resolve their own difficulties, but if there's a particular developmental strategy and agenda that's being pushed forward by an alliance of liberation movements; did the Secretariat take a position on this?

CW: Probably not, but what we try to do and if I can limit it to this particular example - it's quite a good case study I think if you probe into it - is (a) we had a good expert group with prominent Commonwealth experts from Africa and other countries which were respected by most of the certainly black South Africans. We had two respected experts from inside South Africa, one was Professor Francis Wilson who was also very respected among the ANC and others and what we then did, which I think was the critical thing, was we went to South Africa. I remember almost commuting there *[laughs]* at one stage between '90 and '94. We met with the key groupings, the Council of Churches, the universities, the Black Consciousness Movement, because at that time of course PAC was also an actor, we talked to them, the trade unions obviously and so we did try and engage with the key groupings and as far as possible reflect their views in our final report.

SO: Was the Commonwealth of Learning in any way involved in giving advice on how to deal with the tertiary sector in South Africa post-apartheid?

CW: I think it has been since then. It wasn't at that stage I don't think. I think it had just been set up I believe when we did this exercise, I can't quite remember.

SO: Yes, because it was set up at Vancouver.

CW: At Vancouver, it would have just been operational so it wasn't really engaged because I think we maybe even started the exercise around the same time or just afterwards.

SO: No, I'm just thinking of the enormous trauma of merging the apartheid university sector with the black university sector -

CW: Sure, of course, of course.

SO: - and the problems that that's caused.

CW: Yes.

SO: I just wondered if the Commonwealth had in any way provided expert advice.

CW: I honestly don't know. You may need to check on that and maybe the Association of Commonwealth Universities I'm sure would have been involved in some way. I haven't really been involved in all those other areas but I'm sure there has been involvement in that area. However our expert group did address that issue too.

SO: So, in addition to providing advice on post-apartheid human resource development – on the question of the selection of expert groups outside, did individual countries volunteer? Were these selected by Chief Anyaoku's Secretariat, identifying particular elements; how was the composition of the group chosen?

CW: It's like most expert groups. There has to be some geographical balance so that different parts of the Commonwealth are represented, you have to be sensitive to the political issues so I think maybe there was a strong African component. I think ultimately we identified people in consultation with key countries, so it was a bit of both really I guess, but probably most of us being proactive from this end in selecting people.

SO: Staying on Southern Africa: what's your particular view of the Commonwealth as a diplomatic actor in its various guises - at top level and then at the quasi-governmental level - in terms of Zimbabwe?

CW: In terms of the recent developments?

SO: Yes.

CW: Well, it tried to, as you know, play that big role up to the time Mugabe pulled out (in 2003) because that's a whole exercise in itself and I think it did try very hard to see if it could move things forward. I think it was running into all sorts of barriers, not least the position of other South Africans at that time and other people in the region and it comes back to, in a sense, the earlier business, the fact I mentioned, just that Zimbabwe was hosting lots of Commonwealth

Secretariat meetings to help the ANC and others and that intimate connection between Mugabe and the ANC, so clearly it was always going to be a very difficult task.

If you ask me what's happened since then I think it should have been perhaps a little bit more proactive; but one of the positive developments was, and again it's something I was a bit personally involved with because I chaired an initiative a couple of years ago which brought all the key non-Secretariat Commonwealth bodies together on Zimbabwe, which resulted in the establishment of something called the Commonwealth Committee on Zimbabwe which tried to really re-establish linkages with key bodies within the country, whether it's education or trade union or others. Perhaps without blowing my own trumpet too much, the Local Government Forum was the only Commonwealth body that maintained its links with Zimbabwe after Mugabe pulled out. We were just about to start a major local government programme in the country when Zimbabwe left the Commonwealth.

After obviously careful consultation, we decided to continue with that programme and it was quite an important programme because it involved councillor training, it involved other areas, but of course, you know the thing that happened with Zimbabwe was that certainly the MDC had a very strong base again in the trade unions with Tsvangirai, Head of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. Although the programme, and I should emphasise this, wasn't in any way meant to be party political and we wouldn't have been able to do the programme *[laughs]* if it had been, the reality was that when the very contested general election took place in Zimbabwe in 2005, which was generally decried as being not very *[laughs]* shall we say, accurate. At the same time there were local government elections when Mugabe clearly had his eye off the ball and the MDC won nearly every single seat in the urban areas. The extreme case was Harare where 47 out of 48 wards went to the MDC, at the same time as the national election went to ZANU.

SO: So that's why 'Operation Murambatsvina' was pushed forward?

CW: Yes, I guess. So there has been this very strong MDC presence, certainly in the urban areas and even some of the rural areas which were ZANU strongholds. The whole programme, as I emphasised, was non-party political but obviously we were working with whoever was in control so it had the indirect effect of helping councils address their local service structures. We maintained an engagement with Zimbabwe throughout that period and I think it's since a shame that other Commonwealth bodies weren't able to do the same, although for very good reasons. I think there's now a case for re-engaging stronger again with Zimbabwe I believe.

SO: Kenya has been another Commonwealth country, particularly since 2007, which has hit the headlines because of its own political problems. Has the CLGF's involvement in Kenya been comparable to trying to boost Kenyan local government capacity as an adjunct to having a vibrant, effective political culture and improving service delivery?

CW: We haven't been involved as much as I would like and one of the difficulties we have had in Kenya, and being very open about it, is that it's probably had the most centralised system in East Africa. So the local government structure has been very much under the control of central government; we've been

obviously trying to help them to move forward and with the new constitution I think there's now some opening up, but we haven't been as engaged perhaps as we might have been.

SO: Were you aware of any Commonwealth input in conflict resolution around that post-election crisis from 2007 to 2008? As far as you're aware, has the Commonwealth tried to contribute to constitutional reconstruction, or local government reorganisation?

CW: A little bit. There were a couple of CFTC experts and certainly one of them we had contact with at some stage was contributing towards a discussion about the greater decentralisation which is now under the new constitution. However, I'm not sure it's the most ideal system that's been adopted under the new constitution because it basically creates a middle layer of counties or almost provinces, which is positive, with new decentralised powers; but the other side, if I understand it correctly, is that they've taken away the right of individual towns like Nakuru and Kisumu to elect their mayors and to elect people directly, so they can only be appointed top down from the new provinces. So it's a bit of a mish-mash; perhaps things could have been better structured but overall it's a step in the right direction. And I guess the simple answer is we haven't been engaged enough with it. Some of the Commonwealth bodies and CFTC experts were helping and advising, and we fed a little bit into that, but I guess it's a question also partly of our own resources and how much we can do at any one time.

SO: In two other problem areas: the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Where has your quasi-government organisation or the Commonwealth been behind the scenes. The Maldives to begin with: has the CLGF been in there as providing training, information, and expert advice in the Maldives?

CW: Again it depends what time period you're talking about. I think on the Maldives we've got quite a strong track record. We were involved prior to the democratic transition in advising the then minister (who now happens to be the Vice-President under the new dispensation), Mr Mohamed Waheed Deen, on local government structures; he was quite an advocate for decentralisation. And again, to put it very crudely if you have a little tiny island 1,000 miles from Male, why should it need to get its authorisation to purchase a new boat or a new jetty from somewhere 1,000 miles away? So I think that's the rationale of decentralisation in a country like the Maldives.

So yes: we were involved, we were involved both at a practical policy level advising the previous government and then the Nasheed government after the transition. We also took part in a joint observer team of the Secretariat for the first ever local government elections which were held as the last stage of the democratisation process and we've since been engaged in trying to develop the new local government structures.

Obviously since the events of February 2012, we've been very worried about what's been happening. I think I may have mentioned it earlier, we actually put a submission to CMAG in September 2012 expressing our worries, the extent to which the new regime seems to be clamping down on Male and other city councils; I think even now there's some suggestion that they might abolish the elected structures there which we think would be a serious infringement of CMAG and the Commonwealth Charter. So, I guess our

position has shifted from being very linked into facilitating the process, to being concerned about the political developments with the current government.

SO: On Sri Lanka; at what point did your organisation become more formally involved? I'm just trying to fill out some details of your engagement in that particular country.

CW: Well, we've never not been involved! I have a personal engagement with Sri Lanka and that goes back to my trade union days to the year dot when I was running around tea estates trying to promote workers' rights, but that's wearing a very different hat way back in the '70s. In terms of the Local Government Forum we've had on-going work in Sri Lanka since we were set up. Probably more in terms of regional engagements, for example, we did some events there even when the war was on.

Now, since the end of the war which is the critical issue, we've tried to, in a very modest way, facilitate post conflict reconciliation between the Tamils and the Singhalese local government leaders. And again this is perhaps not generally realised, there were, we feel, quite open and fair local government elections in Sri Lanka in 2011. I think part of it was finished in 2012 which did result in Tamil mayors being elected in Jaffna and other places, we feel, in a fairly organised way. What we've tried to do since then is to make sure that whenever we have Commonwealth activities certainly in Sri Lanka the two sides are there. One example was we did quite a high level event with the Secretariat in Colombo in April last year, 2012, and I specifically ensured that we had people like the Mayor of Jaffna and the Tamil Mayors who came to the event, to encourage that kind of coming together. More recently in August last year, we sent a joint CLGF Secretariat Mission to Sri Lanka for about two weeks to look at the possibilities of us developing a more substantive in country programme to promote reconciliation, local democracy and grassroots respect for Commonwealth practices, but I appreciate it's all a bit overshadowed by the wider *[laughs]* developments!

SO: I'm consistently struck by what hits the headlines doesn't give necessarily a true picture of what's going on on the ground. What you're describing is really, as you say, a degree of local level organisation which says that actually the Sri Lanka story is 'good in parts', rather than a disaster case.

CW: Exactly, and obviously you know what's happened with the legal appointments and so on, it's very disturbing. But I think there are other positive developments which one has to look at, and even looking at it on a very superficial level, I remember when we did our events at the Taj Hotel in Colombo. The beach outside was full of barbed wire, with patrolling police and bombings, and all the rest of it. The last couple of times I've been there, I've seen families there with their kids having their picnics and enjoying themselves; and thriving beach scenes, so one has to see it all in context. As we know, it was a very bloody, nasty war and for the bulk of the population it has brought peace.

SO: Carl, thank you very much. I think I should stop there because I'm very conscious of your limited time. But thank you very much indeed.

CW: A pleasure.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]