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VOICE FILE NAME: COHP (Sir Malcolm Rifkind)

Key:

SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)
MR: Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Respondent)
s.l.: sounds like

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow interviewing Sir Malcolm Rifkind at Portcullis House, Westminster, on Tuesday 8th January 2013. Sir, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by saying, please, when you became Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office in April 1982, what was your perception of the role of the Commonwealth in the Falklands War? This was of course the crisis for Britain at that particular time. I realise that wasn't necessarily your responsibility at the Foreign Office, but what was your perception and discussion with your colleagues?

MR: Yes, indeed you are correct, it wasn't my responsibility so I had no, as it were, day to day involvement in Falkland or indeed for that matter in Commonwealth issues. My responsibilities were Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and other departments of the Office, but I took part in the daily meetings under Francis Pym with all the junior ministers where we got a feel as to the way the discussions and negotiations were going, how it was going with the United Nations and so forth and I saw a lot of the background material which was circulated to all ministers. So I had a reasonably good idea on these issues.

On the particular Commonwealth dimension, most of the countries of the Commonwealth were very strongly supportive; indeed it's difficult to think of any that were not. In some cases there was a very obvious reason; they were small, much of the Commonwealth, about a third of the Commonwealth are very small micro states, they are small islands or very small countries sometimes with very large neighbours and therefore they could empathise with the Falklands. Subject to the caveat that of course for one or two of the newer Commonwealth states the Falklands represented a colony and colonisation and therefore there was a slight conflict of loyalties, but for the most part they were on side and of course countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand and so forth were almost instinctively very strongly supportive.

SO: Were you in any way drawing upon Canadian intelligence, or was this principally American intelligence in supporting Britain's taskforce sent

down to the Falklands? I just wondered if there was a Commonwealth dimension to supporting the Task Force?

MR: Well, I think intelligence cooperation at that moment in my career was beyond my pay grade so I wouldn't have been involved in that, particularly as I was not the minister with direct responsibility for the Falkland Islands. On all matters of intelligence it's only the ministers who are directly involved including junior ministers who would see intelligence, so I can't give you a useful answer on that particular one.

SO: Were you aware that at the United Nations there had been a group of Caribbean states who had opposed the idea of Britain's use of military force to regain the islands?

MR: Yes, there was a lot of negotiation going on and the Argentinians and the Latin American countries obviously broadly were sympathetic or at least wanted to give the impression to Argentina they were sympathetic *[laughs]* to its cause. Some really were. Some were not, like Chile for example. Chile was very hostile to Argentina and very helpful to the United Kingdom. Brazil was, on the face of it, not that cooperative, but in practice did not prove to be a difficulty as far as I'm aware. When it comes to the Caribbean states then it tended to depend on the personality of the individual Prime Minister or local feeling in that particular island.

SO: I know from talking to Sir Ron Sanders that there had been a group of Caribbean states behind the scenes at the United Nations who were not keen to support Britain, because they felt that this was an outdated imperial adventure to reclaim a colonial possession.

MR: Well, it was similar to part of the debate that took place in the United States, people like Jeanne Kirkpatrick and so forth trying to persuade Reagan not to automatically support the United Kingdom, really for two reasons. First of all, the point you just made about the Falklands being a sort of colonial outpost and shades of the Monroe Doctrine and so forth, but also this being still during the Cold War period, the feeling that the United States should not jeopardise its relationship with the Latin American countries on the wider global issues by instinctive support for the UK. Now, there were American voices arguing that point of view. Cap Weinberger was one of the leading people to take a different view and as we all know Reagan eventually came down on the side of the UK. I think Sir Anthony Parsons, our ambassador at the UN, was a classic example of where a really good and active ambassador can make a really substantial difference, and he was on television and radio in the United States day after day and helped move American opinion in the right direction. So, your question of course was particularly about Commonwealth and Caribbean countries but what was happening in the United States was very important from that perspective as well.

SO: Yes. I was at the British Embassy in Washington at the time and Sir Nicholas Henderson I know was equally important in playing a key diplomatic role with the Americans.

MR: Yes.

SO: You became Minister of State at the Foreign Office in 1983 and I understand that Sub-Saharan Africa was part of your responsibilities at that particular point.

MR: Yes.

SO: Mrs Thatcher, of course, welcomed President P.W. Botha to Chequers in June of 1984; do you recall the lead up to that particular meeting?

MR: Yes. Essentially we were trying to pursue a policy in the United Kingdom of making clear our abhorrence of apartheid, our desire for a political change for evolution towards a multi-party non-racial democracy, but we had very major problems, particularly with Commonwealth countries most of whom wanted us to go beyond condemnation and move towards full economic sanctions, a sort of total embargo. And I can give you one example of events that took place that I was personally involved in, very relevant to this issue. I also had responsibility at that time as being the Europe minister, but normally when there was a meeting of Foreign Ministers Geoffrey Howe would personally attend.

On one particular occasion he could not attend because he had to be in some other part of the world so I was recruited to represent him and the big issue was whether the European Union could, or the European Community as it then was, could reach agreement on a package of measures of sanctions against South Africa. And the remit of my brief was that we could go along with that as long as it didn't include economic sanctions because we already ourselves had an arms embargo, we refused to sell arms to South Africa, we had the Gleneagles Agreement on sporting contacts and various other measures, but the one thing I was not permitted to do was support anything that involved economic sanctions.

So, we were quite close to reaching an agreement in the Council of Ministers and then unexpectedly a proposal came forward that one of the things that we should do, that we should add to the package was to withdraw all our defence attachés from Pretoria and that had not been anticipated, so we hadn't cleared our lines on what our policy should be on that. I immediately got a message through to Geoffrey Howe and he contacted the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Defence were very relaxed about it. They said, "Actually in South Africa the defence attachés have virtually no access to South Africa including the British defence attachés", or not of any real value should I say, we'd had social access but nothing of any real value; and so they weren't really concerned, and Geoffrey Howe said, "Well, in that case I don't mind, I can see no reason why we shouldn't go along with that but you'd better clear it with Number 10", quite rightly. So, I got in touch with Number 10 and got a ballistic response saying, "The Prime Minister under no circumstances is prepared to accept this absolutely outrageous, ridiculous suggestion", the usual sort of Margaret Thatcher response.

So, we were still having the discussions around the table in Brussels and it was quite clear a consensus was emerging subject to the UK, an agreement on the whole package, the only thing outstanding was the defence attachés, no other country had any problem about it. So I went back to Number 10 and said, "Look, this is going to be very embarrassing and we've only got a couple of hours to get this sorted out". Eventually, we didn't get agreement, but we

were told that, “Why don’t you ask for a deferring on the defence attaché? Agree on the rest of the package and say we need more time on the defence attaché point and the Prime Minister will be willing to hear the arguments before she comes to an absolutely final view but she’s very unimpressed by this”. So that’s what happened. Problem averted in the immediacy.

Well, for the next couple of weeks Mrs Thatcher was persuaded against all her instincts, very grudgingly to agree to it and it happened. Now, the reason I tell this story is there’s the most wonderful sequel. It’s more about Margaret Thatcher than the Commonwealth but I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. Two months later Samora Machel, the President of Mozambique was in London and he was seeing Margaret as Prime Minister and I was asked to sit in on the meeting as the Foreign Office person there. Samora Machel started berating the British government for not doing enough on South Africa, and Margaret bridled and she said, “Mr President, I cannot accept that, the suggestion that we do not do enough to force change on South Africa. We’ve refused to sell them arms. We have the Gleneagles Agreement stopping all sporting contacts. We have various diplomatic measures” and it was this, “We, we, we” and then she stopped, pointed to me and said, “They have decided to withdraw our defence attachés, don’t know what good that will do!” she said, “But they seem to think it will”. Well, Machel was looking as if to say, “What is this?” *[Laughs]*

SO: He didn’t understand about the Downing Street/King Charles Street divide! *[Laughs]*

MR: And it was to the credit of this wonderful woman that she had been so irritated by this whole thing, “We’re doing this, we’re doing that, we’re doing that. They!” *[Laughs]* As if it was nothing to do with her. *[Laughs]* But that was all background to the recognition that we had to see if there were new avenues for putting pressure on the South Africans and that led to the P.W. Botha meeting at Chequers.

SO: Had you met South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha before that meeting?

MR: Yes. I can’t remember precise timings but I’m pretty certain I’d been to South Africa. I lived two years in Zimbabwe, what is now Zimbabwe.

SO: Your thesis was on the politics of land in Southern Rhodesia.

MR: Yes, exactly right, politics and land in Rhodesia.

SO: That’s one of my questions for the 1990s.

MR: Oh, we’ll come to that, we’ll come to that.

SO: Please.

MR: So, I knew Southern Africa pretty well, in fact my wife grew up in South Africa and then Southern Rhodesia. She was sent to school in England, so yes, the answer is yes.

SO: Were you at the meeting at Chequers in June 1984?

MR: Oh, with P.W. Botha?

SO: **Yes.**

MR: Oh yes. The reason, for two reasons I remember. Geoffrey and I had been asked by Margaret to come slightly earlier in the morning so that we could have a last minute final briefing session with her and we both arrived separately by car at Chequers at about eight o'clock or eight thirty in the morning and it was still closed. And we rang, we'd got out of our cars simultaneously, the cars had disappeared, we rang the doorbell and nothing happened. We looked at each other saying, "We can't both have got the timing or the day wrong" so we rang it again and we heard a sort of flurrying noise on the other side. And you know how they had these young WREN women?

SO: **Yes.**

MR: Well, eventually we heard this rustling noise and the door opened and this young WREN officer was buttoning her tunic as she opened the door virtually, and Geoffrey was fantastic *[laughs]* as only Geoffrey could be. With a complete straight face in his very mild voice, he said, "Good morning, we're calling on behalf of the Conservative Party"!

[Laughter]

MR: Total collapse of this young woman! *[Laughs]*

SO: **At least it wasn't the Jehovah's Witnesses! *[Laughs]***

MR: Well that's right! But no, that was the P.W. Botha visit.

SO: **Do you have a clear recollection of that discussion with P.W. Botha?**

MR: Well, quite a lot of it was a direct bilateral between Margaret and P.W.

SO: **I was just wondering that actual meeting at Chequers.**

MR: Yes. It wasn't really productive *[laughs]*. The chemistry was okay. It was quite important. It was the first time there'd been direct contact with the South African government for a good number of years. He was a rather stiff, formal character, nowhere like De Klerk subsequently who was totally different in style and content and substance, and PW was not proposing to give very much. But, from his perspective the contact itself was very important. They assumed, I think they slightly exaggerated this, but they assumed that Margaret was more personally on their side than the British government's public policy might have indicated. I think Dennis was. I'm not sure that Margaret was; I think she may have realised that that just couldn't be sustained.

SO: **I understand that there were some notes going in about the British Lions/Springbok rugby match on that particular day.**

MR: It's possible. I can't recall it.

SO: The Springboks were playing and the notes were going into the discussion of the score, which apparently were passed around the table.

MR: Entirely possible. My own personal involvement on the day was not substantial. I was present at the lunchtime and I think we had some informal discussions during the day with the more junior members of the delegation.

SO: So you would have met Vic Zazeraj who, the -

MR: Zazeraj? I don't recognise the name.

SO: He was, as I understand it Pik Botha's private secretary who accompanied him.

MR: Oh well, in that case I probably did but I don't remember his name, yes I'm sorry.

SO: Okay. Pik Botha described that P.W. Botha was on his best behaviour at that particular meeting but also he made the comment that his English wasn't totally fluent, so that would have acted as a -

MR: I think that's probably right. I'm trying to, as we speak, I'm trying to remember now. I think what happened is Margaret went off with P.W. Botha, Geoffrey had a session with Pik and I was really just dealing with the more junior members of the delegation.

SO: Yes. Do you remember what Geoffrey Howe and Margaret Thatcher reflected afterwards on the value of the meeting?

MR: That the meeting was important for having happened.

SO: Yes.

MR: That it could be the beginning, it could be the beginning of a process but there wasn't much. It wasn't like the Gorbachev meeting, you know, 'this is a man with whom we can do business'; there wasn't that sort of stuff.

SO: There was no sense of that?

MR: No, not at all. Nor should there have been because that wasn't Botha's position.

SO: No, indeed.

MR: If that had been De Klerk it would have been, 'This is a man with whom we can do business' because he was exactly Gorbachev. He was the Gorbachev of South Africa. The parallels are uncanny.

SO: Although the great surprise within South Africa was that he did prove such a liberalising force after August 1989, because they'd expected -

MR: Yes it's very interesting. I'd met him once before he became President, when I went as Minister of State to South Africa he was Education Minister. I'd been able to have meetings with half a dozen South African ministers, not just Pik but other members of the cabinet. Well, I say half a dozen, it may have been three or four and he was the only one that stood out. The rest of them were perfectly pleasant people but they were very conservative, had nothing terribly interesting to say, pretty second division and I remember coming away from the meeting with De Klerk, it wasn't so much what he said, it was how he said it. He sounded like a Western politician.

SO: Yes.

MR: He was interesting and interested, and he clearly had the ability to grasp the broader picture. Most of the South African National Party were insular: partly because of the effect of sanctions, they never travelled, they hadn't met anyone.

SO: Yes, very insular.

MR: They're very insular. They'd neither met the ANC nor had they met other countries because very few governments would meet them and De Klerk was the exception to that.

SO: Did you have any meetings with the ANC? I realise that you were a government minister, but you were further down the totem pole, as it were.

MR: Yeah, that's right. Not so much that, the problem at that stage and it changed fortunately, was the ANC was still branded a terrorist organisation and it took a while for Mrs Thatcher and indeed the ANC had to itself change of course, but it took a while to get the government to accept changes like that.

SO: I know that Oliver Tambo came to London in August of 1985.

MR: Yes.

SO: He didn't meet Mrs Thatcher obviously -

MR: No.

SO: - but I just wondered if there were any other lower level meetings.

MR: I'm pretty certain he did, he may have met at an official level but I don't recall any ministerial meetings.

SO: Did you ever meet him in Lusaka?

MR: Yes I think, no, no, in Lusaka, I can't remember. I mean I think I would remember if I had have done.

SO: So you met him later.

MR: I think I must have met him later, yes.

SO: What was your opinion of him?

MR: I can't offer one. If I did meet him, it was too incidental. I remember meeting, shortly after South Africa had its first non-racial government I visited South Africa and one of the persons I met was the new South African Defence Minister and in fact by this time I think I was Defence Secretary, that's right, this must have been about 1992 and he was a chap called Ronnie Kasrils, who was a white member of the South African Communist Party. Ex-Umkhonto we Sizwe and of course he'd been on the genuine terrorist end of the ANC. A lot of the ANC were not terrorists in that sense but he had been. I remember *[laughs]* having this wonderful conversation. He was a very engaging guy and I was sitting next to him and we were able to have this one-to-one conversation over dinner and I said to him, you know he'd been educated at LSE in London. I said, "Tell me", I said, "It was also alleged during the apartheid period that you guys, Umkhonto we Sizwe who were involved in the armed struggle that you'd had training in the Soviet Union, this is what the South African government always alleged that you'd been trained in the Soviet Union and this obviously implied that you were a pretty horrible lot". I said, "Was that true?" and he looked at me with a smile and said, "Yeah, it was actually true. We had training in Ukraine and all this sort of thing". Then the conversation moved on *[laughs]* and I was keen to find out why he had decided to go the armed struggle route, and he said, "Well", he said, "frankly most of us, we were quite left wing and we came to the view that white South Africans would never give up apartheid voluntarily. They might pretend they were going to but it would never actually happen. It would only be by military struggle and by armed struggle and by methods we used that we would be able to change South Africa for the better". And I said, "I suppose that's what they taught you in the Soviet Union". He said, "Oh no, no, no, that's what they taught me at the LSE!" *[Laughter]*

SO: Hmm. I'd better apologise for my alma mater here!

MR: Oh you were at LSE as well!

SO: Yes!

MR: Oh dear! *[Laughs]* But I swear he said that and he roared with laughter. He said, "No, no, that wasn't the Soviet Union. That's what they taught us at the London School of Economics!" *[Laughs]*

SO: Well, it did have the reputation of being a hotbed of radicalism!

MR: I thought you'd enjoy that but I didn't realise why you'd enjoy it! *[Laughter]*

SO: So, when you were Secretary of State for Defence, having such contacts with South Africa, was Britain making offers of assistance as they went through negotiations for transition for amalgamation and change of their armed forces?

MR: Well yes, we were very much involved in trying to help on that particular front, and remember the experience we'd had in Zimbabwe.

SO: I was going to come to, yes.

MR: With merging the Rhodesian army and the African nationalist forces ZAPU and ZANU. The initial British cooperation was actually of a much more unusual kind. It was Robin Renwick when he was ambassador. South Africa hadn't yet re-joined the Commonwealth and the initial problem - stop me if you know all this - was the one we were touching on earlier that once De Klerk had started the reform on policy, part of the problem was neither he nor most of his ministerial colleagues had ever met any of the ANC. Although the ANC were now in South Africa openly, it was still too early to have formal meetings; it hadn't moved that far at this stage. Robin Renwick developed what has since been acknowledged by South Africans as hugely important for them. He had a series of dinner parties; they were ordinary dinner parties but at each one there was one South African minister and one black guy from the ANC and a dozen other people. The dinner itself was nothing very special and nothing very memorable, but afterwards when everyone went back to the drawing room for coffee, it had been prearranged, and both the minister and the ANC guy knew this was going to happen, that they would be in a particular corner of the drawing room, just sitting together having coffee together. Nobody else would bother them for about an hour or so, an hour and a half, and it wasn't to negotiate, it was just to get to know each other.

SO: **Yes.**

MR: There was a series of such events of that kind and both white South Africans and the black guys have since said that made a very profound difference because it was crucial at that stage that the personal chemistry should be available.

SO: **Yes.**

MR: It didn't solve the ultimate difficulties that had to be negotiated, but it meant at least the individuals knew each other and in some cases liked each other, and actually because they were all South Africans found they had much more in common than either had realised. Once the political decision had been taken that apartheid was going to go, there were two heroes: Mandela's own particular determination on reconciliation and De Klerk. Mandela was fantastic, but De Klerk in some ways was even more impressive because Mandela was receiving power, whereas De Klerk was having to persuade his community to give it up.

SO: **To give it up, yes.**

MR: And that took even greater statesmanship: the decision, for example, to have the referendum of white South Africans was a hell of a gamble. But people forget that. He persuaded 66% of white South Africans because they were the only people allowed to vote, to vote to dismantle apartheid. That enabled him, not to ignore, but to essentially push into the cul-de-sac the ultra-hostile South Africans who wanted to keep apartheid going.

SO: **Just going back to the 1980s, you mentioned Zimbabwe and Britain's experience of contributing to the bringing together of three hostile armed forces, which has been described as a success, and that you drew on it in South Africa in the offer of assistance. Were you aware as a minister, of the Gukurahundi campaign, the violence in Matabeleland?**

MR: Yes. The short answer is we did become aware but not all the detail of it. I remember at one stage roundabout that period I was in Zimbabwe as Minister of State at the Foreign Office, and had a meeting with Mugabe and part of my brief was to indeed raise that very issue.

SO: Because the violence in Matabeleland was after all an enormous complication for the success of the Lancaster House Agreement and Soames's governorship: the story had been that there should be a peaceful transition to a multiracial Zimbabwe.

MR: Well, you're absolutely right. In a sense what we were desperately hoping was that this was an aberration in the new Zimbabwe that was not going to become part of the nature of the Mugabe regime. Everybody was conscious that there was a power struggle within Zimbabwe between ZAPU and ZANU, between Nkomo and Mugabe which Mugabe was bound to win. What happened in Matabeleland showed his ruthlessness in taking that policy forward; he was not going to be deflected from that.

What was interesting at that period is, the Matabeleland events aside, in every other respect Mugabe was much more pragmatic and responsible than people had anticipated. For example, he made a crucial decision to put out the hand of friendship to the white community when he took power. That broadcast he made on the night that he won the election made a very big difference to the fact that even Ian Smith was allowed to remain in parliament, speaking and normally criticising the government which was significant. And I remember hearing that what had been important to Mugabe at that time was the advice he got from Samora Machel who said, "Don't make the mistake that we made. We thought we could do without the Portuguese, we were quite happy to see them all flee and leave, and then our economy collapsed". Mugabe at that time was wise enough to not make that mistake. He was, I think, also very much influenced by Christopher Soames.

SO: Very much so. In fact Soames had advised him just before that television broadcast to extend the hand of friendship.

MR: That's right. I think that that was a very powerful factor and so although we were conscious that some pretty nasty things were happening in Matabeleland, the overall picture of Mugabe's approach in Zimbabwe was not too bad and remained reasonably pragmatic - as long you were prepared to live with the 'Comrade this and Comrade that', and meetings of the Politburo and all that sort, but that was terminology. Most of the economic policy and the political policy and the human rights attitudes apart from Matabeleland were pretty reasonable in those first few years.

SO: Do you remember Commonwealth discussions about that?

MR: I wasn't involved in them but I'm sure there would have been but I wasn't involved. I didn't attend a Commonwealth conference myself.

SO: So, just going back to South Africa you didn't attend the CHOGM at Nassau in October of 1985?

MR: No.

SO: You were still Minister of State at that particular point.

MR: Yes, but that was just the Heads of Government, the Head of Government and the Foreign Secretary went.

SO: Right. Would you have been involved in the preparation of briefing material for Mrs Thatcher and Geoffrey Howe going to Nassau?

MR: I probably saw it but it's very interesting how the position's changed a lot more in recent years where the junior minister now tends to get involved. For example, when Margaret Thatcher went to European summits, although I was the Europe minister I didn't go; I wasn't invited to go *[laughs]*. I was in Brussels nine times, you know, every bloody week at other meetings. But the Heads of Government were Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers, and they were of course surrounded by the senior diplomats. In a sense there was a logic to it, but there wasn't much role for the junior minister because if it was political that's what the PM and the Foreign Secretary were doing. If it was official advice then they were getting much more professional advice from the senior diplomats than from the junior minister.

SO: But obviously you were reading the telegrams coming back.

MR: Oh yes, absolutely.

SO: And do you remember what your feelings were about Nassau. Mrs Thatcher was under tremendous pressure from the other Commonwealth Heads of Government to expand sanctions on South Africa.

MR: Yes, but I'm trying to distinguish it because that happened in every Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting! *[Laughs]* Which year was Nassau?

SO: Nassau was October 1985, where the first EPG was agreed, as a compromise.

MR: Yes, that's right.

SO: And if the EPG could get into South Africa, then there would be a delay on a Commonwealth decision on whether further sanctions should be extended. At the press conference afterwards, Thatcher described her compromise as 'a teeny tiny bit.' I wondered if you listened to a rather fraught Geoffrey Howe coming back to the UK?

MR: But that was Margaret. We were used to this; this may have happened in the Commonwealth context but it was happening in the Europe context, it was happening in every other damn area. That was her style and that was her strength, and that was her weakness.

SO: Yes.

MR: I've always taken the view that Thatcher, as with all the really great leaders whether it's De Gaulle or Churchill, and Thatcher comes into this category -

what makes them magnificent also made them insufferable; and you wouldn't get one without the other.

SO: Yes, flawed great men.

MR: Yes, and women! *[Laughter]*

SO: We'll go with 'mankind'! There you are, generic! *[Laughter]*

MR: 'Mankind'. But I think, although like all my colleagues from time to time I could have torn my hair out because of something Margaret was doing, you recognised also that she had qualities which were hugely beneficial. Because we had the benefit of seeing it in the round and because at least for the first six or seven years of her Prime Ministership, there was far more which was successful and impressive than made one despair. Now, that sadly changed a bit as she came to the end of her Prime Ministership.

SO: From your viewpoint in the Foreign Office then, as a mid-ranking minister, had she "taken over British policy towards South Africa"?

MR: *[Laughs]* No. She had a much more hands on approach in the sense that she wanted to be consulted and to clear every aspect of policy, but it was rather like her policy towards the Soviet Union. It evolved, and in the case of the Soviet Union she was wise enough and thoughtful enough to grasp the huge significance that Gorbachev could represent. In the case of South Africa, her instincts would have started off being quite sympathetic to white South Africa and certainly hostile to economic sanctions; but she recognised that that couldn't be a permanent political situation and that Britain's role had to be to try to help the South Africans move in a peaceful way towards fundamental transition. And the South Africans had so few friends and allies around the world that although Britain wasn't an ally, they rightly assumed that Britain at least understood their point of view even if it didn't agree with it and was looking for solutions of a peaceful kind. So, once South African politics moved itself in that direction, then the United Kingdom was crucial. Because Margaret was a right wing Conservative, then the South African government felt slightly less uncomfortable than they would have been if it had been being lectured by Harold Wilson or someone of that ilk.

SO: Pik Botha, in my interview with him, was quite emphatic how valuable she was.

MR: Yes.

SO: And that he was also using her as a crowbar against P.W. Botha, saying, "We can't do this to Margaret Thatcher. We can't humiliate her. We have to take advantage of this one friend that we have".

MR: Yes. Because we didn't budge at any stage on no support for economic sanctions and because she was prepared to be isolated at the Commonwealth, the South Africans saw, "This woman is going further than anybody else is going to try and help our position". But they also knew or some more than others, Pik Botha certainly knew that they couldn't assume the United Kingdom at the end of the day was going to be on their side, that we were not prepared to become identified as supporters of apartheid

because we weren't. We found it as repugnant as anybody else found it, but the debate was about how you got rid of it and not whether you got rid of it.

SO: He was very clear about that, very clear indeed.

MR: Yes.

SO: Do you recall anything around the creation of the first EPG, or was that just at the time when you were making the transition to Secretary of State for Scotland?

MR: I think that must be right. I can't exclude the possibility that I might have been involved at the margins but I was transferred when Heseltine resigned.

SO: So January of 1986.

MR: January '86.

SO: Coming onto your time as Secretary of State at the Foreign Office between '95 and '97, of course South Africa had been resolved as the principal issue challenging the Commonwealth at that particular point. And the Commonwealth itself was evolving into more of a human rights, and values based organisation: do you recall what were the biggest Commonwealth issues to confront you during your time as Foreign Secretary, in that two year period?

MR: I think most of that period was just, from the British perspective, a huge sense of relief that this problem of South Africa, in terms of the damage it was doing to the Commonwealth and Britain's relationship with its Commonwealth partners, was substantively behind us. There was a sense of liberation. I don't recollect any major issue that was filling the gap but I might be forgetting something.

SO: Well, in comparison French nuclear testing in the Pacific which confronted people at the Auckland CHOGM.

MR: Yes, in New Zealand, yes indeed, yes.

SO: There was also the issue of climate change which was causing tension with Paul Keating in Australia.

MR: I didn't go to the Auckland CHOGM. I could have gone because I was Foreign Secretary; John Major was obviously there. The reason I didn't was because it was just at the time, that weekend, I'd been with the Prime Minister in Israel for the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin. Remember he'd been assassinated.

SO: Yes.

MR: It was a very, very tense moment in the Middle East and I discussed it with John Major and it was my view which he accepted that I could be more use that weekend elsewhere, which I did do. I had meetings with Arafat and I went on to Damascus, the only time I met Assad pere and King Hussein, whereas if I'd gone to the Commonwealth Summit and the Commonwealth Summit was Heads of Government, and particularly at that time, less so now, Foreign

Ministers didn't have very much to do. We were just sitting, drinking cups of coffee, having informal -

SO: Chatting at the Retreat! [Laughs]

MR: Yes, in a sense because you weren't even involved at the Retreat as a Foreign Secretary.

SO: Oh I see.

MR: It was Heads of Government. So I thought, do I really want to go all the way to New Zealand in order to be sitting in the anteroom, hearing what's going on, when I could be doing substantive stuff in the Middle East? That's why I didn't do it.

SO: The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group of course was created at Auckland.

MR: Yes.

SO: Do you have any recollections of your views on CMAG and its efficacy?

MR: Yes well absolutely. Well, not so much about its efficacy. The principle behind it was first class. If I remember rightly, it was partly a reaction to Ken Saro Wiwa's execution in Nigeria.

SO: Yes.

MR: The feeling that there were some serious human rights outrages that were happening in various Commonwealth countries and the Commonwealth had to be more forward in trying to deal with them. So the concept of CMAG was an excellent innovation. Of course when I was on the EPG a year or so ago, we were concentrating on what CMAG had failed to do and how it could be improved.

SO: Also of course in the 1990s for Britain there was the issue of land in Zimbabwe. Not much is written about British policy towards Zimbabwe in the 1990s before the Blair Government.

MR: Yes. No, I remember raising it with Mugabe a couple of times when I saw him in the early 1980s when I was a junior minister and subsequently. But this goes back to various allegations or memories of what was said during the Lancaster House negotiations; and I was not involved in Lancaster House, I wasn't in the Foreign Office at the time. It appears that in an informal way when the subject of that was raised that either Carrington or whoever might have been [unclear - 36:27] official, I'm not quite sure, sounded sympathetic to the need to help the new Zimbabwe government with land reform.

SO: That was implicit behind the discussions but it had to be 'willing buyer, willing seller.'

MR: You're absolutely right. That's always been the crucial issue that the United Kingdom would have been willing to allow economic aid or assistance but it was on the principle of 'willing buyer, willing seller' and Mugabe wasn't

thinking in those terms. What would have happened if he had been willing, I'm not sure what scale of aid might have been possible, whether it would have been significant or not, because there would have been a reluctance in the UK to distort our aid budget.

SO: But the meeting in Zimbabwe in 1981, the ZIMCORD meeting, there was a specific discussion about the development of land.

MR: You could be right. You're ahead of me on that. I don't know about that.

SO: This international donor conference was quite emphatic and Soames was, in his continued private discussions with Mugabe after the Zimbabwe election of Feb/March 1980, was trying to support him. It strikes me that throughout the 1980s there were so many other problems confronting the Zimbabwean government and sufficient under-utilised land that it wasn't a serious issue.

MR: Well quite, I think what you're saying is indeed true. I don't know what happened with Christopher Soames, that was before my time, but what I can say quite explicitly is in the meetings that I had with Mugabe and with other ministers in Harare when I was Minister of State, the issue was raised but it never dominated our discussions. It was almost as if on each side you have four or five items you want to raise in your brief and you work your way through. But some are more important than others. Land was mentioned by Mugabe to me: he gave his view, I gave the Foreign Office response and we moved onto the next subject. It never dominated the exchanges at that time.

SO: But you made the point that Mrs Thatcher's policy towards South Africa evolved. Did British policy on the Zimbabwean land issue evolve from the '80s to the 1990s?

MR: I don't think it evolved in the sense that your question seems to imply. Essentially it became pretty obvious that there wasn't 'willing seller, willing buyer' circumstances and that against that background it was inconceivable that we would wish to allow our own overseas aid budget to be used for compulsory purchase.

SO: Was Britain though, under the Major government, prepared to support a land audit to ensure that ownership of land was correctly registered, so that whatever form of accelerated transition of land was orderly and managed?

MR: I do not recollect that question ever being raised. I'm not saying it wasn't raised, I just can't recall personally that issue. I remember, because of my own background, having done my own postgraduate research work in my own thesis into politics of land, I have always been conscious of the fact that the position, some aspects of it were pretty difficult to justify. I don't mean in terms of historical origins, that's a different issue, but in terms of under-utilisation of much of the land they had. Much of the land owned by white Rhodesians, white Zimbabweans, was properly developed either for tobacco or for other products and was very successful and very impressive, but there were large swathes of land under-utilised; and so you had large numbers of landless Africans, blacks, and significant areas of land which wasn't

necessarily the best but was still perfectly able to be developed but which was not available.

SO: Just as a final potential point of tension within the Commonwealth in the 1990s, do you recall Pakistan's covert nuclear programme featuring, particularly with a view to the tension between Pakistan and India over Kashmir, as a problem within the Commonwealth?

MR: No, not at all, I don't see it as a Commonwealth issue. It's always been a major issue in two respects. First of all, in terms of nuclear proliferation and secondly India/Pakistan relations - two major Commonwealth countries who occasionally went to war with each other *[laughs]* but, as we all had to acknowledge, for Britain to say anything or involve itself in any way, direct or indirect, on Kashmir is the short route to total obloquy from all sides. So Britain was pretty reluctant to take any diplomatic action - I mean, for example with a dispute like Cyprus we were very much involved. We were very much the lead international player in trying to resolve the Cyprus issue. Kashmir was exactly the opposite. We stayed out of that as much as we possibly could, not because we didn't have a view but because India and Pakistan were such major countries in their own right, they had to try and address these matters themselves.

SO: But would there have been quiet diplomacy, though, encouraging that they improve their bilateral relationship?

MR: Yes. We meant what we said and what we meant was, first of all you guys have to sort this out yourselves, secondly that has to be done by diplomatic means and it's appalling that two such major countries don't have contacts; for example there's not even a trading relationship between India and Pakistan. Pakistan refused to have normal trading relations with India and it was cutting off its nose to spite its face. So these two massive economies, India particularly, but Pakistan is pretty large, and there has been virtually no trade with each other for 50 years.

SO: So, there was no possibility of a British ambassador encouraging two antagonists in a room to go and have a quiet chat after dinner?

MR: No. You had a situation where both sides found it convenient to say that it was all Britain's fault, the problems that had arisen at the end of the Raj in '48 which we should somehow have prevented happening. But in any event, we didn't have either the political power, it wasn't a military issue, and we didn't have the diplomatic power, to order India or Pakistan as to what they should do in Kashmir.

SO: Sir, as a final point because I'm very conscious of time, do you think though this would be a possibility of the Commonwealth as a diplomatic actor, through the good offices of the Secretary General, creating space that is outside, shall we say, formal bilateral relationships?

MR: I think in the unlikely event, the highly improbable event of India and Pakistan both saying, "We would like to move forward in a diplomatic way, can the Commonwealth help?" then the Commonwealth would be a perfect instrument for doing that.

SO: Yes. But it's a very unlikely scenario.

MR: Yes quite, that ought to be what the Commonwealth should be doing and it has done relatively similar things in other parts of the world with much smaller disputes and much smaller issues, but Pakistan would probably quite like it. India will never agree. India is the country that controls most of Kashmir and the Indians will not brook any international responsibility or interference in what they see as a bilateral problem with Pakistan. So it's not going to happen.

SO: Sir, on that point I'm going to end. I'm very conscious of the end of our appointment. But if I may, please could I come back to you and make another appointment?

MR: Yes, why not. Let's see, how much more would you like to?

SO: Probably another hour to discuss aspects of India in the Commonwealth, other points about the Commonwealth contributing to resolution of international problems in the '90s, CMAG and the second EPG.

MR: Sure.

SO: If that was acceptable to you?

MR: Yeah, I'm sure it will be.

SO: Thank you very much indeed, Sir.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]