



University of London

INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

Interview with Ambassador Matthew Neuhaus, 8th August 2013 (by telephone with Harare)

Key:

SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

MN: Matthew Neuhaus (Respondent)

SO: Matthew, thank you again for that very detailed first interview that you gave me. Picking up from when you joined the Secretariat in the early 2000s under Don McKinnon's tenure: the first question on my list concerns McKinnon, and the 'old' and 'new' Commonwealth. Do you think that's a fair distinction to make, from your observations - that there was in fact a distinction in his treatment of member countries, or his relationship with particular countries within the Commonwealth?

MN: I'm not sure. I see the old and new Commonwealth as a rather old fashioned way of detailed thinking and, if anything, McKinnon wasn't old fashioned in his approach. Certainly we have the developed and the developing Commonwealth. And I think that is more how I like to think of it. The developed nations in the Commonwealth who are providing most of the resources but have been gradually joined by developing Commonwealth members, countries like Singapore, Malaysia and India are moving from the sort of smaller developing countries, and the Commonwealth is getting more complex even along that ground. So, I think most of the discussion in the Commonwealth though is around issues of development. Related to that of course are the political issues and the governance issues, but it is really around development. And essentially the Commonwealth is an organisation for promoting development in member states. The developed Commonwealth has as much of an interest in that as the developing Commonwealth because most of the developed Commonwealth has significant development assistance capacity.

SO: In terms of McKinnon's actual relationship with Commonwealth countries: I have to say from reading his memoir *In the Ring*, it did appear to me that in terms of dealing with Commonwealth issues within Africa, that there appeared to be particular points of friction, in contrasting political styles and approaches.

MN: Well, he also had a point of friction with Britain!

SO: Oh yes!

MN: There was significant friction with Britain and, quite honestly, he and John Howard and Alexander Downer had their problems as well. So on McKinnon's style: yes, there were issues like Zimbabwe which he saw in very straight forward principles issues whereas, for some of the African nations and especially for Mbeki in South Africa, they felt he wasn't showing enough understanding to the colonial legacy; whereas he was of the view it was high time, you know, we got over the colonial legacy and started focusing on the future. So, I think it would be too simplistic to talk of the frictions of McKinnon as simply one way. In fact, he sometimes got rather caught in the middle, even on an issue like Zimbabwe between the approach of John Howard and the approach of Mbeki, especially in that Troika situation.

SO: Yes, you spoke very eloquently about the breakdown of the Troika on the Zimbabwe question, leading up to the Abuja meeting in 2003. As you say, McKinnon also had his points of difference and difficulty with the British Government. Would you put this down more to a particular approach or style? Was it issue-based? Was it a question of different bureaucratic cultures? How would you explain these frictions and where would you locate them particularly?

MN: Obviously there was an element of style. McKinnon was a very straightforward Antipodean in that regard, whereas Britain has a much more subtle and complex political culture.

SO: And use of language.

MN: And use of language indeed, indeed. But largely it was issues based. One of the most difficult issues was the whole issue over the Commonwealth Institute and what should happen to it. Now, there was a strong group on the British side - not just the British Government but more broadly - which was much more in terms of preserving a tradition, whereas in McKinnon's case, he saw it as no longer providing much of a service to Commonwealth countries and wanted to realise the finances that could flow from it and use to support education in Commonwealth countries. And that was just one example of friction. But there are other examples in which - to be fair to McKinnon - he was actually trying to express to Britain a more subtle understanding of the developing world. I remember going with him to see Tony Blair ahead of one CHOGM where Tony Blair just thought this CHOGM was basically about terrorism and Zimbabwe; and we had to sit him down and say, 'Well, it's rather more complex than that, Prime Minister. There are a whole lot of development issues that we are going to have to address.' And Tony Blair was the man who after all was supposed to be supporting African development in a big way.

SO: Absolutely, in the Millennium Development Goals.

MN: Exactly. And actually, he was rather impatient with getting into some of the complexities of the issues: the Small Island States, for example; issues of trade relationships and unequal trade relationships and so forth; issues of engaging the European Union which he was well placed to be more helpful on. So there were a lot of complexities in the relationship.

SO: But was the relationship or the treatment of Pakistan ever a point of friction between Marlborough House and Downing Street, or King

Charles Street? Obviously after 9/11 and the American and British movement of troops into Afghanistan and then the launching of course of the war of Iraq in 2003, then the British attitude to Pakistan altered. You've mentioned the question of terrorism: international terrorism pushes very much up the agenda. And yet, after all, Zimbabwe was held to account for failings on its governance issues, in a much stricter way, than was Pakistan.

MN: Yes, well Pakistan is an interesting one to reflect on there. Of course McKinnon was fairly helpful in encouraging the Africans to accept the lifting of Pakistan's suspension on the basis of essentially a promise of the Musharaff Government to move forward on elections and reforms. And indeed, when Musharaff reneged on this at the time of the Uganda CHOGM we had to then re-suspend them. And then of course there were the elections that followed quickly; the death of Benazir Bhutto, but then the election of a democratic government. By then, it was Sharma as Secretary General who lifted again the suspension. But yes, Pakistan and Zimbabwe had clearly been discussed at the same time and there was some concern about potential double-standards. On the other hand, it was interesting how the British used the Commonwealth in this context and in its relationship with Washington. I remember on one occasion going to Washington with McKinnon and having a discussion with Vice President Cheney about Pakistan. And pushing the democratisation agenda at a time when Cheney was really embracing Musharaff and had relatively little patience for this. McKinnon was in good standing in Washington from his days as New Zealand foreign minister so he had very good access. He and Cheney had known one and other for over 20 years in politics and he was able to pitch the case. And I think the British were quite comfortable with us doing that because they were under various pressures at home on Pakistan to take a rather more complex approach to Pakistan than the simple American War on Terror approach. McKinnon was also really helpful to Britain on making sure Iraq did not blow up as a big issue in the Commonwealth, because of course the majority of developing members were quite opposed to the intervention in Iraq; but we were able to use the tradition that the Commonwealth did not engage on issues relating to non-Commonwealth States to ensure it did not become a debating point at a CHOGM.

SO: Matthew, was there pressure that this issue should be raised?

MN: Oh yes. So other countries are very concerned because it was an issue of Western intervention in a developing country.

SO: Were there any particular critics who were using the channels of the Commonwealth in addition to their criticism in the Security Council, or in the General Assembly in New York?

MN: Oh there would have. The idea was floated by some of the African and Asian members but we had a very easy answer and the consensus remained around it, because I think even developing countries wouldn't get far in the Commonwealth on this issue. Now you could say South Africa wasn't a member when the Commonwealth took such a strong stand on South Africa.

SO: Yes.

MN: So we were able to argue that Iraq was a rather different order and the Commonwealth had enough problems to deal with; it was better not to get into that. I suppose some of the African and Asian countries (would have done), if there had been an opportunity to use this against the United States; but use the Commonwealth as a forum to build support against the United States on Iraq, they would have done so if they could.

SO: Matthew, in managing or in ensuring there is consensus it seems to me there is an awful lot of leg work and a tremendous amount of work ensuring that the ground going into a CHOGM should be smooth. Were you involved in the preparatory diplomacy, in the travelling around various capitals? Who would express their concern or their wish to raise certain political issues that might be tangential to as you say, core Commonwealth discussion points? Before the Abuja meeting, did the Iraq war require a certain amount of active diplomacy by the Secretary General to ensure that all parties appreciated what would and would not be discussed, or be problematic at that meeting.

MN: For me it was a central part of my job both as Political Director and as Secretary to the CHOGM. In travelling around I was supporting McKinnon or independent of him. And of course this is why we would go to meetings like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) meeting, CARICOM, African Union and so forth, where you could hold discussions on a range of issues leading into a CHOGM. Obviously Zimbabwe was one of the big ones where particularly on that occasion before the Abuja CHOGM, they required a few other issues. Indeed, as I say, Iraq was very live at that time and in those meetings one would have with the NAM or with the African Union or so forth, we would go through these sorts of issues, get member states' views and those provided that could not really be discussed in a CHOGM context.

SO: This was very much established diplomacy practice and presence by the Secretary General from Sonny Ramphal's days. These were not McKinnon's initiatives in going to other international meetings to ensure there was a specific, coordinated or agreed Commonwealth consensus?

MN: Yes, Ramphal certainly developed it and then Anyaoku built on it. So you know they was a well-established tradition of using such meetings to do this.

SO: But how about Bangladesh? How much of your time and energy in International Division's and the Political Affairs' work, did you have to devote to Bangladesh?

MN: Compared to Pakistan and some of the African issues and indeed even Fiji, not as much until later in the piece, until... you know we did go to Bangladesh on a couple of occasions. Others in my office went more times to Bangladesh particularly trying to shuffle between the two parties to develop a greater consensus; but the real issue of Bangladesh came up later in McKinnon's time when it stopped short of a military coup but there was a sort of caretaker government. Managing that and avoiding Bangladesh actually being suspended at that time but while the government worked its way through this and set up a sort of environment in which elections could be held, it was quite important and the Commonwealth was quite heavily involved in that.

SO: Very much so, not least of course through CMAG. How much of your time and efforts were focused on this question of the remit, or the revision of the CMAG process in McKinnon's time?

MN: Well not so much the revision of the CMAG process but the actualisation of the CMAG in officer's process. For me it was well over 50% of my time. And I think it was even for McKinnon himself, it was something of that order. If you include Good Offices activities, things that weren't necessarily on CMAG's agenda. So within that sort of area, work in places like Guyana, Maldives, in addition to Fiji and Pakistan and Zimbabwe - although Zimbabwe was not properly on CMAG's agenda. It was outside: one could address with those sort of broader Good Offices activity. And also issues like the Solomon Islands, in The Gambia which actually for a period were on the CMAG agenda and required a lot of time and other issues like Swaziland, where we were helping with the draft constitution, was a major Good Offices. During McKinnon's time we also developed a much more intellectual approach to the use of Good Offices and the use of our special envoys. I haven't mentioned Tonga for example. We even had a conference where we called all the special envoys together and we brought the people from the UN, like Brahimi, and actually talked through and contextualised the Commonwealth approach to Good Offices. We produced a booklet in about 2006 on that. One of the key things of McKinnon's time was indeed the expansion of CMAG's activities and the Good Offices work.

SO: So those who would say that McKinnon's time was characterised much more by the Commonwealth as an international trade and finance organisation, and the attention that he certainly devoted to those issues, misrepresent his achievements whilst as Secretary General?

MN: Yes absolutely. I would think that would be quite a wrong reading. There was some good work done on trade, developing relations with the EU and so forth, but I would think that one couldn't say that was the principle focus of work, or that people thought that was where the real value-added of the Commonwealth was. I think that the value added in that time was much more in the area of Good Offices and the sort of conflict resolution within the state which the UN could not touch. And I think the Commonwealth has a really very valuable niche. An increasing trend in that period too was in the way in which we began to work more with regional organisations and strengthen regional organisations like the Pacific Islands Forum, and indeed the CARICOM, to build up their capacities to do that sort of work as well. But no, I think the economic side of things were certainly not the prime achievement of McKinnon's time.

SO: Speaking of successes or continued works in progress, Matthew, I wondered if you could reflect on the Maldives and also Sri Lanka during your time at the Secretariat?

MN: Yes, well the Maldives is the easier one in a way because it was much more straightforward. During that period we actually went from a position where Maldives was a very authoritarian state with principal opposition leaders like Mohamed Nasheed actually in jail. Through a constitutional government programme which then led to elections that were free and fair and saw Rashid actually elected President of the Maldives. Now we are still living with some of the fall-out from that with what has happened over the last year or so

with Nasheed's arrest and now preparing for new elections again. So the Maldives is a classic story of moving its authoritarian Islamic space into a more mainstream democratic developing state. Sri Lanka is much more complex because there you had a country that was broadly accepted as a multi-party democracy but with a significant terrorist threat which was then overcome during this period but at the cost of significant human rights abuses; and we are still working through that. And on that the Commonwealth was not as heavily engaged and at certain times was very much kept at arm's length by the Sri Lankan Government. So we were probably able to do less than we would have wanted to.

SO: Was there a question of the Secretary General wishing to do more but having to respect regional sensitivities?

MN: Well regional and national sovereignty. The thing about the Commonwealth is in terms of state organisation it works by invitation of its member countries. And so forth but of course for part of this period Sri Lanka was actually on CMAG – namely, a member of CMAG. It was very jealous of its prerogatives and it was a state under threat at that time so it was particularly sensitive. But yes, I think the Commonwealth would have liked to have done more and I think it's true we would have liked to do more in Sri Lanka; but it hasn't you know, been given as much opportunity as it would have liked.

SO: Of other non-Commonwealth countries: was McKinnon ever invited to use his Good Offices in, say, Burma or East Timor - thinking of other countries with significant domestic issues. I was wondering whether the Secretary General, quite apart from his very heavy travel load and 'in basket' in his office, was drawn into any other sort of international mediation attempts below the radar?

MN: Not really. The most significant one would be Rwanda which eventually became a member of the Commonwealth where we were quite actively engaged in the missions leading up to that and encouraging primarily through member states, development of democratic institutions because it was all about putting Rwanda into a position where it could actually achieve the requirements for membership. We did have some discussions with East Timor and Ramos Horta was also very interested in Commonwealth membership but others in his country weren't; the door was never really opened there. Almost certainly not. At one time they had some approaches from Yemen but nothing much managed to get off the ground on that. It was a very complex problem. We did have interaction with the Organisation of American States and La Francophonie discussed various issues. (We) provided them with advice on Commonwealth situations which might assist them and other country situations they face but it was a fairly low level and quite frankly McKinnon had more than enough on his plate with the Commonwealth.

SO: No, he wasn't out there looking for extra issues to resolve! I can quite understand that.

MN: But there is another point here. He wasn't like Ramphal. Ramphal actually went on a lot of international commissions and so forth. He had a broader remit. Because Ramphal had that sort of broader interest. McKinnon was much more focused on the Commonwealth.

SO: Matthew, in what way did the Secretariat or the Commonwealth's relationship with Francophonie and the EU alter during your time at the Secretariat? And in what ways?

MN: It became much closer. We got to a point where we were meeting much more regularly, exchanging information.

SO: At whose initiative?

MN: It was mutual with Francophonie and the Organisation of American States in particular. And I would meet regularly with opposite numbers there. We would meet at the UN and would go and visit one another at their headquarters. So yes, we would be in e-mail contact; we would exchange information and McKinnon actually gave something of a focus to that sort of relationship building.

SO: So this was very much at his initiative that those relationships were deliberately strengthened with the exchange of information and contact?

MN: Yes. Definitely. But regularised.

SO: And in what way do you feel that the Secretariat and the Commonwealth benefitted from those strengthened links?

MN: How were we strengthened by it? Well, it certainly gave us a broader strength of international policy. In areas like Africa it meant that we saw things, we learnt from the context of which our members saw them. Our African members see very much through the African Union, the ways of the African Union and SADC and so forth. So we got to understand that sort of regional dimension. It meant that we could actually get those organisations to back us up and we could back them up where necessary. The Pacific Islands Forum might be one which would be the most concrete one to talk about in that regard where we had a close relationship and in support of them and on issues like Solomon Islands or Fiji, we worked very closely together. I remember, for example, just on the Solomon Islands: you will remember that in the early 2000s, about 2001/2002 there was an Australian intervention there which became the regional Assistance Commission to the Solomon Islands. It was very much done with the support of the Pacific Islands Forum. I remember McKinnon going to a CARICOM meeting and the concern at the CARICOM meeting about this, because they said this was very much like an intervention by a major power, Australia, and they were thinking of sort of American interventions in Latin America. McKinnon was able to explain the nature of RAMSI and defused possible Caribbean criticism in the UN of the regional mission in the Solomon Islands. So it was an interesting way in which firstly, work with the Pacific Islands Forum, Australia was part of that, but also because we had a wider vision and wider interaction where questions were being raised about this and we were able to address them and therefore be helpful to the regional organisation.

SO: In terms of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings themselves, the Ministerial meetings, the Senior Officials Meetings and

their diplomacy: after Abuja there were the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings in Valetta, Kampala and the Port of Spain.

MN: Well, I was actually finished by the time of the Port of Spain. I did a preparatory work for it but by the time of the actual CHOGM I was back in Australia. But first of course I set up our CHOGM in Perth and then came over to this CHOGM from Zimbabwe and then returned for the Perth CHOGM as, if I might say so, under the key advisers of the then foreign minister.

SO: In terms of those three then between Abuja and Perth: Valetta, Kampala and Port of Spain: would you say that those were relatively uncontentious? Or were there particular political issues from your point of view in the International Division that stick in your mind of being of significance in the history of the Commonwealth?

MN: I think compared to Abuja, where Zimbabwe was such a contentious issue, they were much easier. At Valetta in particular, no one really wanted to talk about Zimbabwe any more and it was a dream because the Maltese were so easy to work with; you'd organise a meeting and they had all the resources. Kampala was a bit more problematic not least of course because Kampala itself was somewhat controversial as a destination with Museveni's reputation. And Museveni is not the easiest head of government to deal with.

SO: Idiosyncratic, yes!

MN: Very idiosyncratic and no real democrat. I remember going on one of our planning meetings coming in and there being some demonstrations in Kampala which unfortunately got out of hand, with a couple of people being shot by the police when we arrived. We had been involved in meetings all day and in the evening Museveni when he entered the door, said "You know, what's happened today this is what your democrats are doing". I responded, "That's not the way it works, Mr President!" and if they could be allowed to demonstrate peacefully this would not happen.

SO: [Laughter] "No, it isn't, Mr President!"

MN: So people forget that Kampala was also at the meeting at which we had to re-suspend Pakistan. And of course at that time it was very uncertain where Musharaff was taking the country in terms of the election. Of course, the Africans were feeling rather self-satisfied because there was a non-African problem that was dominating the Commonwealth at the time.

SO: Yes, I can imagine there was a certain sense of one-upmanship.

[Laughter.]

MN: Yes, exactly. So Pakistan was quite big at Kampala. Port of Spain, I don't think it was as contentious. At Port of Spain Sri Lanka was the most contentious because that was the one where Sri Lanka was supposed to be the next host; there was a lot of concern about Sri Lanka, and the conflict hadn't yet ended. And that was when Australia then put up his hand and said "Right, perhaps we should put off the question of Colombo hosting and we will have it in Perth, and we will see then after Perth whether Sri Lanka will be in a

position to host.” So actually, while people don’t remember this, the Sri Lanka issue was in fact quite contentious at the Port of Spain.

SO: And again, was there a divide, groupings of the African/Asian nations feeling that there needed to be recognition conflict resolution and progress made towards that in Sri Lanka? Whereas others were more concerned to hold off on making a decision on the selection of Colombo as a future Heads of Government meeting, to see how things went? Or was it a question of Sri Lanka lobbying very heavily that Colombo should be chosen?

MN: Oh no the Sri Lankan’s were very keen that Colombo should still be chosen but they couldn’t hand on heart say that the situation would be fixed by then. So they were in a fairly weak position; I think a lot of people including in the African and Asian groups were quite nervous and so were more than happy to see a compromised position.

SO: Matthew, I wonder might you be prepared to talk on your view of the election of Secretary General Sharma? Or would you prefer not to answer questions on that?

MN: No, I’m quite comfortable. I think there’s no real controversy around the election itself.

SO: Okay. What about the selection of the Secretary General Sharma? Obviously India had given particular attention and an expression of wish that its candidate should be a strong candidate for McKinnon’s successor?

MN: Yes, I think at the time, it was coming around. There’s a strong sense it should be Asia’s turn. There has never been an Asian Secretary General. And initially there were a couple of potential Asian candidates. After all, McKinnon had beaten Chaudry from Bangladesh, now unfortunately for Chaudry who might have had another go at it, Bangladesh at that point was being run by the caretaker government. So it couldn’t, it would have been awkward for someone who didn’t have a democratically elected government behind him to put up a candidacy. So there was an element there. And for a while Malaysia was putting up a candidate and would have been very credible. But decided not to do so in the end and then of course India sort of hummed and harred and was looking for a minister to put up but didn’t have any minister who wanted the job. So in the end Sharma was put forward and Sharma had a lot going for him: a renowned Indian diplomat, who had been Ambassador in New York, had been an Under Secretary General of the UN and was High Commissioner in London. But initially Sharma did not expect that he would be put up for the job so in a way it almost became a default position. Now once India’s candidacy was in the ring, all the other potential Asians, and there could have even been a Sri Lankan, pulled back and decided to coalesce around India. Sharma had a close relationship with Mrs Gandhi and so he had strong support from the Indian Government. But the only two people who then tried to run against him was Mohan Kaul of the Business Council and then Foreign Minister Frenedo from Malta. Now I think Frenedo really showed a lack of understanding of the Commonwealth dynamic. He made the pitch that he was a politician and the Secretary General should not be a diplomat, but should be a politician. And indeed I think that was

McKinnon's own personal view, but the reality of that position is that more often than not it's been held by a diplomat. McKinnon is actually the exception in that regard.

SO: Well, you could say that Ramphal was also a politician.

MN: Yes, but not really. Originally when the Secretary-General position was set up it was said to be of senior Ambassadorial rank. And that was the formal position. Arnold Smith was exactly that. Ramphal, while he was an Attorney General, was an appointed and not an elected Attorney General. So essentially he was a civil servant. Anyaoku was essentially a diplomat; he came out of the diplomatic service and came up through the ranks of the Commonwealth, returned as an appointed foreign minister of the Nigerian Government for six months and then came back into the Secretariat as Under Secretary General after a coup. So essentially he was a diplomat. So, in that sense McKinnon is the only person who has been Secretary General who was an elected politician the other four come from a diplomatic/civil service background.

SO: Matthew, when did discussions on McKinnon's succession really begin? Would they have been after the beginning of McKinnon's second term so people were already then looking for...?

MN: As we've discussed before, there was that bid to oust McKinnon at the end of his first term, at the Abuja CHOGM.

SO: With Mugabe lobbying so heavily. Yes.

MN: Yes, and then it was in Malta that it got going again and hence why I think Frenco at the time who, I think, was chairing CMAG, and saw a potential opportunity. But of course he failed to recognise that, in terms of geographical grid and rotation, McKinnon was very much coming out of the Western group as was Frenco, so to the wider Commonwealth that was not really seen as appropriate.

SO: Yes. Matthew, my question 12 after your view of the election of Sharma on my list is the Palace. And I wondered if you could reflect on the role of the Queen as Head of the Commonwealth and her particular contribution to keeping the organisation together.

MN: I'm one of the people who believe that the role of the Queen has been very significant. It will be interesting to see now what happens because you know we are going into a CHOGM where the Queen for the first time in decades will not be there and obviously time is marching on and she will be departing the scene and it is yet to be seen to what extent her successors will embrace the role. But she has strongly embraced the role; there have been moments when, at the Lusaka CHOGM in 1979 for example, you know her insistence on going to it forced a rather wavering British Government to be involved and with Margaret Thatcher there, we were able to get a breakthrough on the Rhodesia/Zimbabwe issue. There have been other times when her personal diplomacy has been key. She meets with all the Heads of Government and then she brings them all together at a dinner so helps to ease tensions between various Heads of Government; and certainly her star quality attraction means that one of the reasons the Heads of Government want to

go to the CHOGM is to meet the Queen and to be at the banquet. It's always a great thing; so she's part of the attraction of a CHOGM for the Heads of Government and not least their wives as well.

SO: Yes, I can see that. The question of regal hospitality shouldn't be overlooked.

MN: The Head of Government wants that photograph with the Queen to bring back home and all of them splash it over their local newspaper.

SO: As they should, because it is a remarkable access as are the individual audiences that I know that she gives each Head of Government. And that question of personal attention.

MN: Yes.

SO: In what other ways do you feel that the Palace, and its courtiers have been of assistance to particularly the Secretary General? How far is the relationship with the Head of the Commonwealth a key part of any Secretary General's job?

MN: Absolutely, the relationship with the Head is strong and ongoing and to the point you know, even the other day when I was in London and went and saw Edward Young, the Deputy Private Secretary who I had got to know well during Commonwealth years to talk about Zimbabwe; and he was particularly interested to have that information to pass on to the Queen. When I was High Commissioner in Nigeria I had a personal audience with the Queen on one occasion and we talked about a range of African issues and this was particularly at the time when Nigeria was coming back from being a military government. There was the possibility of an Abuja CHOGM coming and her visiting Nigeria. So she does and the Palace does a very thorough job and they are very attentive to protocol issues, and to the order in which she meets people and what might go in her speech. At her last speech at the Perth CHOGM when reform was very much on the agenda, the Queen encouraged the Commonwealth to be bold. And that is a strong message and a positive pro-reform message as well. And I think everyone got the signal from it.

SO: How much do you think there's also a question of Secretaries General supporting the monarch in various ways through the Commonwealth? I've read that Chief Emeka in 1997 initiated the practice of the Queen having a formal role at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting which she had not had before. And that Emeka as a very strong Monarchist had done this to place her centrally at this Heads of Government meeting?

MN: Yes. That's very true and she does this formal opening speech that hadn't happened before and I think it was a good development. But yes you're right: Secretaries General have been very positive about the Queen's role. I mean there's a practical element to it. You know, the Queen provides Marlborough House and a lot of other support.

SO: [Laughter] And a nice office, it is too!

MN: The Commonwealth can draw on that and of course the Royal Family is promoting a whole lot of Commonwealth associations which produce their own strength. But I think the Secretary Generals have always appreciated their audiences with the Queen and they have used that to advise her. I think from the Queen's point of view, her prestige in Britain certainly, and perhaps internationally as well, has been enhanced by the Commonwealth role and has created a sort of Christmas Broadcast which inevitably refer to her travels around the Commonwealth. And you know Britain has benefitted from this role as well internationally.

SO: **Yes.**

MN: A lot of goodwill is generated and indeed substantial economic interchange.

SO: **Yes. Matthew, you were involved in the preparatory work for Port of Spain at the Secretariat. But then you returned to the diplomatic service in Australia but were drawn back in for the Perth meeting.**

MN: Yes.

SO: **In what ways, were you liaising particularly with the Eminent Persons Group, in the question of timing and presentation of their report, of the Charter in any way? Or was that left to the Secretariat?**

MN: No. Well it was primarily the Secretariat. I mean they provided the Secretariat to the Eminent Persons Group. But obviously we were very supportive of the Eminent Persons Group. We have one of the more active members, Michael Kirby, to keep us closely informed and we were able to feed views through him as well. It was a very good relationship and that was helpful for us to make sure that the agenda of the Eminent Persons Group was very reform oriented and we did everything to promote that. But the crucial thing of course was when we got to the CHOGM itself and Kevin Rudd had to chair the Foreign Ministers' meeting which made decisions on the recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group and primarily came up with an approach to that which then, over the subsequent year with Australia chairing the meetings, was finalised in what the Commonwealth adopted, including its Charter.

SO: **I was just wondering Matthew if in any way the CHOGM became entangled with tensions within Australian politics, particularly between Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd? Or whether CHOGM was deliberately in an 'exclusion zone', from that particularly political contestation?**

MN: *[Laughter]* That's an interesting question! Nothing was completely excluded from that but they did work together quite professionally in the CHOGM context to get the best outcome possible. And so, obviously there were awkward moments that the diplomats around them might be more aware of them than indeed the visitors. But both of them played a very active role and a helpful role to the outcome and in a sense, wanting a good CHOGM and a like-minded outcome. They were like-minded.

SO: **Aha. Matthew, since you've been appointed as Australian Ambassador in Harare, even though Zimbabwe has withdrawn from the Commonwealth, do you still find that there is a Commonwealth circle of**

discussion which is particularly useful in questions of exchange of information and liaising of ideas?

MN: Yes, well even here in Harare we have our Commonwealth group meeting on a regular basis.

SO: So, just as former British High Commissioner Len Allison said that the Commonwealth High Commissioners' meeting in Lusaka was an excellent way for him to make contact with a particularly problematic government back in 1979. So this is an enduring useful practice and forum? Would you agree with that?

MN: Very much. And for example, here in Zimbabwe it's the one forum that regularly brings together some of the key Western countries like Australia and Britain in particular and as well with some of the key SADC countries like Tanzania, South Africa, Mozambique and Zambia. So we exchange views and I think that helps to build mutual understanding and information sharing. And so we've been able to work much more closely together as a result over a tricky issue like Zimbabwe.

SO: That must be a degree of jealousy by those who don't have the benefit of that Commonwealth loop.

MN: I think the Americans in particular often feel left out, yes.

SO: Thank you for spotting the subtext of my question! [Laughter.] Matthew, and please feel if you want to put restrictions on your answer to this question. To what extent do you feel that perhaps that the Commonwealth and SADC have set the bar of governance and democratic values and particularly election processes, particularly high in the Zimbabwe case and so having agreed to the Latimer House Principles, that the Commonwealth has inadvertently created problems for itself?

MN: Well at the moment most of us are thinking that SADC and the AU have set the bar far too low on Zimbabwe. Given what has been happening and what happened in this election and formal reports coming out.

SO: Matthew, here we are on Thursday 8th August. Have they published their report yet?

MN: Not their final report, but last week of course they brought out their preliminary report. On which basis essentially both Obasanjo for the AU and Member for SADC said the elections were free and fairish. We will come back on the issue of credibility and they were peaceful. And of course this has been now seized upon, enough for Zimbabwe to say its elections have been given the big tick by the regional observers and for congratulatory messages to be pouring in from other African countries.

SO: Yes.

MN: Led by President Zuma, I should think.

SO: Yes I noticed that. I noticed that. Zimbabwe then...

MN: I'm not starting to deal with the Commonwealth of course. The Commonwealth, as you know, has not been here as an observer group but probably once again would have given the sort of robust report that had been in 2002.

SO: Indeed, but then was not followed up on.

MN: The 2002 report was what led to all the drama!

SO: Others would say, though, that a report can be produced, but if there isn't regional consensus on it, this is where election observation reports do become problematic because they don't necessarily then lead to leverage and action?

MN: No, not at all. Not at all. They don't. It's only if the country itself is prepared to implement the recommendations that you see changes. And so often, countries aren't prepared to make the changes because the political leaders in control don't want to do it. But over time there have been substantial changes and you only have to look at the SADC region itself and Zimbabwe clearly now fall short of the notions, say, of an independent election commission for example. Which most other SADC countries now have.

SO: Yes. Matthew, in your long view of the politics of Zimbabwe, to what would you attribute the particular attachment of ZANU-PF to the legitimacy of elections, when it would seem that the practice of those elections is quite so flawed?

MN: Well, that's a very interesting question. It goes right to the mind of Mugabe who has a very legalistic approach to things and this has been the creation of Mugabe during his time in office. But it's all about the form of the law, an approach well known in communist states in Eastern Europe and other places in the past, rather than the actual spirit of the law.

SO: So you would attribute it in fact to an old fashioned practice of socialism? So there is an enduring practice of ideological conditioning, rather than a realisation of what are practices of good governance?

MN: Absolutely, yes. I think when you're in Zimbabwe it is as if the Berlin Wall had never had fallen.

SO: I must admit when I've been listening to the development of the 'deep state' in Zimbabwe - and I don't mean "state" in formal Western terms - of the practice of party disbursement, of particular access to means of survival, housing, licenses in the informal economy, mini-bus distribution networks, this smacks, as you say, of practices of communist states. That it is the state who decides.

MN: Absolutely. That's what it is. Very much in that model.

SO: Ok. Matthew, I am very aware that I've spoken to you for nearly an hour and you have a busy schedule.

MN: I actually do have to go. I was going to say we'll have to wrap this up.

SO: Matthew, I'm very grateful indeed for you taking the time to give me such a long interview. Thank you so much indeed. All good wishes for your continuing work. I feel the game is not yet played out in Zimbabwe, although I'm afraid it's not looking good from this angle.

MN: Not in the short term anyway.

SO: No, I'm afraid not. But I will be in touch and thank you again. Please do get in touch the next time you're coming up to London.

MN: It's nice to see you're getting some publicity of the Commonwealth type issues, more so than the Commonwealth Secretariat herself is doing.

SO: Well, yes. [Laughter] I do find that deeply ironic. Anyway, Matthew, go well and very good wishes. Thanks very much indeed.

MN: All the best now.

SO: Good bye.

[End of Audiofile]