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VOICE FILE NAME: COHP (Matthew Neuhaus 3)

Key:

SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

MN: Matthew Neuhaus (Respondent)

SO: This is Sue Onslow talking to Matthew Neuhaus at Senate House, on Tuesday 11th March, 2014. Matthew, I wondered if you could bring me up to date please on Zimbabwe issues. You've just mentioned that it formed part of a huge discussion at the Sri Lanka CHOGM and yet it didn't make it into the final communique. Could you give me a little more background on that, please?

MN: On Zimbabwe at the last Colombo CHOGM, this followed an election in Zimbabwe on the 31st of July, 2013. At the SADC summit that followed in August, in its communique SADC stated that it welcomed the elections in Zimbabwe which had been free and peaceful and congratulated President Mugabe on his victory. I was at that SADC summit in Malawi. Then Membe, the Foreign Minister of Tanzania and leader of the SADC observer group, came back towards the end of the month to Zimbabwe and he made a comment about the elections being generally credible which was controversial at the time, and didn't actually reflect the draft report of SADC. But be that as it may, the next thing we see is language in a draft communique coming out of the Secretariat and supposedly provided to them by some SADC members, that the Commonwealth took note of the elections in Zimbabwe which SADC and the AU had found to be free, fair and peaceful. So the 'fair' word comes in at this point and later as the debate emerged the word 'credible' also started to be used. I reacted to this when I saw this report and reported back to Canberra and London that this did not reflect what had actually been done.

Then there was a great debate at the pre CHOGM officials meeting here in London around this use of the language. And alternatives were

brought forward around this. But by this point SADC was beginning to dig its heels in on this language, which was inappropriate. Not only because of the factual situation but because first of all it is not normal for the Commonwealth to comment on situations in non-member countries. Secondly, it was language that went far beyond what SADC itself had done and yet the Commonwealth had not in any way observed this election. So from a process point of view, it was very problematic. Then it went to the Foreign Ministers' meeting in Colombo. I wasn't there, but it was reported to me that there was quite an intense debate between SADC members, some other African members and Australia and Britain; and it started to split along these 'old' Commonwealth/'new' Commonwealth lines. Finally when there was no agreement as it went to Heads and then President Zuma (as I was told), as they went into the Retreat, said, "Let's just pull the language altogether".

And so there was no mention at all of Zimbabwe in the communique. Which is a pity because what could have been agreed was that the Commonwealth had welcomed peaceful elections in Zimbabwe and the Secretary General could have been requested to begin a process of engagement with Zimbabwe, as a more positive way forward. Incidentally, in the Zimbabwe press while this debate was going on, there were some articles placed there clearly by the government along the lines of 'the Commonwealth is irrelevant for Zimbabwe.' The very fact that they suggested that the Commonwealth's continuing relevance in Zimbabwe was on their minds. But what I found strange was then as we'd been discussing on the official record and in subsequent discussions about the CHOGM this whole Zimbabwe debate, which went on for overall several hours if you bring officials and Foreign Ministers time together, is just not mentioned now. They're not in the record because it's not mentioned in the communique, and it doesn't reflect the effort that went into this subject.

SO: So were you aware whether Australia was playing a particularly important role in trying to bring this to the fore?

MN: Yes. Certainly I was reporting and I know my points were used by the Australian delegation to try and correct what we saw as a factual error in the way it was being described. And I know that our Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, also spoke to this issue. She's someone who, having served in the past on two Commonwealth Observer Groups on Zimbabwe, has taken a very close interest in what was happening there.

SO: Matthew, you mentioned earlier the former Director of Information, Joel Kibazo's comment, "You can have the best CHOGM in the world, but if it's not reported it might as well not have happened." And yet the attention of the press was very much on the Sri Lanka CHOGM, and the press was defining one particular message: the

venue. So did you have any observations or remarks on having decided to hold it in Sri Lanka, whether in fact this meant that the Commonwealth had 'lost the story on good governance', as it were? It had lost the media message, which is so important to a company, and the perception of its activities?

MN: Yeah. I think at the formal level the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Secretariat was never in charge of the message. I think first of all one has to recall that the Sri Lanka CHOGM had been delayed by two years anyway. The Australian CHOGM had intervened because of that, for the situation with the ongoing conflict with Tamil Tigers at the time and the aftermath of that. So by the time it was held in Sri Lanka a lot had been done. Now, it's certainly true the Sri Lankan government could have done a lot more to address the issues of human rights abuses and so forth. But there were so many other issues, that's very true. And to my mind the Commonwealth never did enough to try and bring those issues forward. So that the space was just left to the controversy about Colombo as the location and whether this was an appropriate location for a values based organisation. And it would have been hard no doubt to have distracted the press or try to bring other issues to the fore. But it didn't seem to me that much effort was made to do so.

SO: Matthew, as a longstanding Commonwealth activist in the Secretariat but also within the Department of Foreign Affairs in Australia, you've remarked that there's been a pattern in the past of leaders beginning their term as sceptical about the Commonwealth but then finding it valuable. So there's a degree of the acculturation too, seen in a growing use of the Commonwealth as a vehicle of national interest. Do you feel that that has changed over your time in Foreign Affairs? Has it diminished?

MN: I think there is a danger that it is diminishing because I can now reflect back on about 20 years of on and off attending CHOGMs. I've said this before: I remember Paul Keating at my first CHOGM in 1995 saying, "Well, that's CHOGM over with. I'm now off to a real international meeting at APEC." So let's not get carried away with this as a recent phenomenon. On the other hand, I do see and Colombo certainly was a low point in leaders' attendance which partly had to do with the controversy of the venue. But it's a real worry if the leaders' Retreat is not a real leaders' event. And I was surprised to hear the number of High Commissioners who were allowed into the Retreat. Only as recently as six or seven years ago, we would not allow High Commissioners in. I recall very clearly that when Australia and John Howard was facing election at the time of the Uganda CHOGM in 2007, we had to ensure a very special letter was provided directly by him appointing his High Commissioner in London to be his special envoy. And this was seen as extremely exceptional.

Since then I've heard that this has become the norm and that is a matter for concern because leaders, if they're not there talking to other leaders, will give up and say, "There's no point in us coming to talk to diplomats now." Diplomats have their own venues to talk in. So I think there needs to be a very firm rule that High Commissioners and perhaps even Foreign Ministers shouldn't be allowed to come into the Retreat. If this means that for a period you only have 25 countries actually in the Retreat, so be it. There are other meetings associated with CHOGM where other representatives can be there. If this means that Britain might not be represented in one of the Retreat sessions, so be it. I think until a very firm line is taken by the Secretariat on this, it will weaken the whole concept of leaders' Retreats and leaders having the opportunity to see the value of the Commonwealth as a way of engaging informally with each other. Equally too, I think and I'm hearing this, that leaders are really...and indeed, officials now, are getting very tired of the whole communique process. And there's quite a push on, and one I support, that all you would have coming out of the leaders' Retreat is some sort of Declarational Chairman's Statement. There would be no Communique at all and that what would come out would reflect what they actually wanted to talk about.

SO: Matthew, in conclusion, do you feel that the Commonwealth has become a victim of a proliferation of international organisations? For busy leaders with only a finite amount of time, it's consequently slid down their list of importance? If there is pressure to concentrate on a particular domestic agenda, given the limited number of hours in the day, if a busy leader feels that their Foreign Minister is taking care of certain day-to-day management of Commonwealth issues, there's a process of an erosion of any interest in the Commonwealth - which further undermines the organisation's utility.

MN: Absolutely right. And I mean this has been an ongoing issue for some time now. So in that environment the summit has to decide what its unique contribution is. And one of the things the Commonwealth has got going for it for leaders is one of those few venues where there is no interpretation. It is leaders coming together, all speaking English, largely from a similar educational background, able to communicate face-to-face. So that's still a value. And often it's a major venue for leaders from bigger countries like Australia and Britain to engage with smaller countries from the Pacific or the Caribbean, and the Commonwealth is useful for them to get to know outside of that broader G20 and outside of the formality of UN summits. So there's still an interest in it. But the second part of it is communication, a new unique way of doing things, being the relative informality of discussions that have occurred in the Commonwealth.

And unless that informality is maintained and not constrained by communiqes and arguments around communiqués, and leaders

feeling that they've become the last resort for trying to settle an issue that's come up in a communique. And that detracts from time and they'd actually like to be sitting down just talking to one another in general terms about the issues of the day. I think unless we get back to that point, then it will have less and less value and without the leaders' Retreat, the leaders' meetings, in my view the formal Commonwealth will eventually die.

SO: Bob Hawke said in his memoirs that he felt the particular value of world leaders meeting was the opportunity to share ideas; and in this way there was - he doesn't use this term – 'a daisy chain' of attitudes and ideas that go around the international community.

MN: Yes. I agree. And I think that's very well put. And I'd say the other phrase I would use is that the Commonwealth is a caucusing group. And one of the valuable things about the way Commonwealth ministers meet is they can form positions that then can play out broadly in UN meetings and can assist in building consensus around positions, whether it's on health, on MDGs, on environmental issues and so forth. So I think Bob Hawke captures it very well. And if we lose that capacity out of leaders' meetings, then it will lose a lot of value in the Commonwealth.

SO: Matthew, thank you very much.

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