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Key:

SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

KJ: Tan Sri Kamil Jafaar (Respondent)

SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow, interviewing Tan Sri Kamil Jaafar via Skype on Friday, 24 November 2014. Sir, I have a copy of your memoirs, *Growing Up With The Nation*. I would be grateful if you could add a little more detail, please, to the material you include on the Commonwealth? Overall, during your time at the Foreign Ministry, how important was the Commonwealth for Malaysian foreign policy?

KJ: Let me start at the point in time when I had to come back to take over the Secretary Generalship of the Ministry. I returned home to handle the Commonwealth CHOGM.

SO: Yes, this was in 1989 when you came back from Tokyo, where you had been the Malaysian Ambassador?

KJ: Yes, in 1989. Before that, the Commonwealth had never quite prominently featured in our thinking. This was Dr Mahathir's idea of bringing the Commonwealth to Malaysia in order to bring some of the leaders from the developing countries, particularly from Africa, to see how a Third World country had proved that to the extent that (it had developed)...and that it is one of the emerging markets. I think this was the basic idea that Mahathir had in him, because in the past he had very little contact with the Commonwealth countries, or leaders of the Commonwealth countries.

SO: Yes, I am aware that he hadn't attended several of the earlier CHOGMs, but that also there had been two very important reports that were written in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and also in ISIS on the value of the Commonwealth for Malaysian foreign policy.

KJ: I'm not quite sure about that, have you read it?

SO: I haven't read the actual reports, themselves. Datuk Noor Farida and Ben Muda pointed out to me that they were of particular importance in persuading Dr Mahathir of the value of the Commonwealth for Malaysia in a variety of sectors; the Commonwealth could provide a variety of

areas and platforms in which the Malaysian government could push forward the Malaysian national interest.

KJ: Yeah, I don't know if I read that report.

SO: I shall have to try to get hold of a copy to see if we can add it to our website.

KJ: Yes.

SO: When you came back from Tokyo, you were responsible for the logistical planning for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kuala Lumpur?

KJ: Yes, so I was responsible for the substance of the meeting – not so much about the political aspect, although I was overall in charge of this side as well. I spent more time working out with the Commonwealth Secretariat on the agenda and substance of the meeting. I had long discussions with the Secretariat, especially Sonny Ramphal on what are the subjects and how we should approach it, particularly on the Langkawi Declaration on the environment.

SO: Sir, I know there were two other senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who were working with you to draft the proposals that were to go forward to the CHOGM, and that the Secretariat in London had its own draft. I understand this was the substance of your discussions when you came to London. You indicated in your memoirs that Sonny Ramphal wasn't happy about this particular way of doing things?

KJ: No.

SO: Why was that?

KJ: Because we thought his draft did not take into account the position of the developing countries, particularly on the environment and development, etc. We thought his draft, the second draft, was too much of – or perhaps influenced by – the white Commonwealth countries' position.

SO: In the final Langkawi Declaration, Dr Mahathir was insistent that there should be no 'conditionalities' attached to environmental issues on trade aspects?

KJ: Yes, that's correct. We fought hard for that.

SO: Yes, so you say that Ramphal was unhappy, but Dr Mahathir was very insistent. Did you have other support within the Commonwealth for this particular approach?

KJ: No, no.

SO: This, of course, was also parallel with the discussions that Sonny Ramphal had had with Dr Mahathir in the corridors at the Non-Aligned Movement meeting in Belgrade, in September of 1989, for the establishment of a G15?

KJ: Yes.

SO: So, were these other moves to establish a forum for the leading developing countries to promote their trade and investment? Were these also filtering into your ideas for the Langkawi Declaration?

KJ: No, it was not.

SO: Thank you.

KJ: It was not.

SO: Sir, coming out of the Kuala Lumpur CHOGM, of course, was the High Level Appraisal Group to look at the workings of the Secretariat and to make recommendations for its reform. I understand that you chaired the committee of officials looking at this?

KJ: Yes.

SO: I wonder, sir, if you could please add some more detail about the workings of that committee?

KJ: How do I start? It was decided that, at the CHOGM in KL, we should look at the workings of the Secretariat and see how that we could improve it and Dr Mahathir was elected as the Chair and with me to represent him. So the members of the Committee were representatives of the heads of Government. Robert Armstrong was there, and then the Canadian representative or Canadian Prime Minister was there; Singapore was there; one or two African countries.

SO: So, you convened relatively early after the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting?

KJ: Almost immediately after. The meeting was held at Marlborough House in London, and then subsequently we kept on having our meetings there; then the final meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur when we had our recommendations agreed to and submitted to the CHOGM, the next CHOGM.

SO: So, was there considerable consensus on that committee that you recall? Or was the issue of the reform of the Secretariat and addressing the discrepancy that could come out of the difference between mandates and committed resources a contentious one? Was there a particular body of opinion within the Committee that was arguing for a certain line?

KJ: No, basically they never seemed to agree on a certain line and that line was to strengthen the Secretariat so they can play a better role in world affairs in development and all kinds of things. I was quite happy that there were very [few] issues that we don't agree.

SO: Do you recall on what issues you did not agree, or where there was considerable argument?

KJ: I think it was on the question of development. The developing countries tried to put more emphasis on development, etc., and that's where we had a little trouble – not much, not much trouble really. It went on quite smoothly about that.

SO: So as officials, you worked well as a committee?

KJ: Yes, we did.

SO: And were you supported by the Secretariat itself?

KJ: All the time.

SO: I'm intrigued that this question of development should have been quite so contentious in terms of the work of the Secretariat, because up to this point Ramphal – as Secretary General – had consistently emphasised the role of development. And the CFTC had operated as the autonomous arm of Commonwealth support (South/South and West/South) of aid and assistance ...

KJ: Yes.

SO: ...so there was already an established track record for the Commonwealth on development?

KJ: There was, yes. But when we come to meetings with our other counterparts – particularly those that made more emphasis on other issues, political issues for example – we had some problems when it comes to development as not many countries see development as we do, and we cannot accept the insistence by some white Commonwealth countries to insert 'conditionalities' in regard to development.

SO: Sir, were the associated aspects of democracy and democratisation also part of the discussion? I know that this is the era of the Washington Consensus. The drive had been towards economic liberalisation in the 1980's, but international financial institutions were certainly pushing emphasis on a greater degree of democracy. The new Secretary General, Chief Emeka, was also starting to promote his own particular emphasis on good government and good governance.

KJ: I'm not quite sure whether we did spend time, a lot of time, to discuss on that actually. But certainly it was one of the subjects we did discuss.

SO: Were you also discussing actual levels of financial commitment from Commonwealth countries towards development? Was the actual budget part of the discussion, and each state's relative contribution?

KJ: That was not part of the discussion, no. Not that I remember, no.

SO: Sir, if I could just take you back a little bit to the discussions that took place at Kuala Lumpur on the new Secretary General. You say in your memoirs that Sonny Ramphal was coming to the end of his third term and that there had been some discussion within the Commonwealth whether he should continue. Do you recall where those sorts of expressions of opinion came from?

- KJ: Probably...I guess a couple of white members. I can't remember whether it was the UK or was it a Briton?
- SO: That's interesting. Chief Emeka's rival for the position of Secretary General was Malcolm Fraser at Kuala Lumpur: but I'm just wondering in the run-up to that whether, in fact, there had been an argument that Ramphal should continue?**
- KJ: It was among the leaders that Malcolm is opposed to; they wanted a new man at the helm.
- SO: Yes.**
- KJ: And it was going to Africa. Dr Mahathir was a bit disappointed later on with the way Emeka handled the whole thing.
- SO: What particularly led to that sense of disappointment, do you know?**
- KJ: I think Emeka was trying to – how will I put it – to put his views too strongly forward to...and Mahathir didn't like this sort of thing. He would like a bit more discussion and not to have somebody imposing his ideas on him.
- SO: Was this particularly associated with the creation of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group?**
- KJ: I'm not quite sure that that was the case, no. I can recall on a few things, I cannot recall this – almost 30 years ago.
- SO: No, as you say sir, it was a while ago [laughs].**
- KJ: Yeah.
- SO: Sir, did you advise Dr Mahathir in any way on how to manage the election of the new Secretary General at the Kuala Lumpur meeting?**
- KJ: Yes, I did.
- SO: And what was your advice, do you recall?**
- KJ: My advice was to...if there cannot be an agreement among the leaders at the meeting, then I told him to have a straw vote, because they said to him it must be decided in KL and not to have it brought to Langkawi, which would [have] affected the discussion at the Retreat. So what I forgot was, for the time when it was decided, was how it was done: whether it was a straw vote or just a unanimous vote because we were all very excited – I, in particular - that this matter was resolved in KL. And then a funny thing happened when I was on stage with Sonny Ramphal and Mahathir, when Mahathir made the statement and the press thought I was Emeka.
- SO: [Laughs] So, you discovered yourself to be Secretary General of the Commonwealth and not of the Foreign Ministry of Malaysia? [Laughs]**
- KJ: [Laughs]

SO: *[Laughter]* Yes, that would have been a very surprising appointment for you *[laughs]*.

KJ: So, I made that recommendation to Mahathir and they talked it out in KL and not bring it to Langkawi.

SO: Do you think Dr Mahathir had actually come to that conclusion already, or this was novel advice for him?

KJ: I'm not quite sure it was novel to Mahathir or not, but he did agree to do it. He actually said he would agree to have it settled in KL.

SO: So, after the Kuala Lumpur meeting, what was the sense within the Foreign Ministry, and also within Dr Mahathir's office, on the relative success of that meeting? I am sure, obviously, you had an intense debriefing. I know you then had the G15 meeting shortly thereafter, which was a considerable logistical burden following on from a very high-level international conference of the Commonwealth.

KJ: It was, but the G15 did something else. I think more difficult to handle than CHOGM. In CHOGM, we had the very strong support from the Secretariat. With the Commonwealth, we were dealing with one language, whereas G15 are made up of 15 countries with a very, very different outlook and very, very different attitudes as they come from...some from Latin America and so on. Those are the problems we face, not only in terms of language differences but also in differences in values and perception. Those are the difficulties that I would say for handling it. And it wasn't until the wee hours of the morning – we had formed two committees, one is the Political Committee, the other one is the Economic Committee – and finally both committees agreed on a set of recommendations and this was to be discussed at the Retreat in Genting Highlands. So, when they came down, it was the President of Senegal, Diop, had suggested that since the officials had worked very hard in the last two days let's all agree that we adopt the recommendation and I acted quickly, which Dr Mahathir seconded.

SO: *[Laughs]*.

KJ: Accepted, seconded it *[laughs]*, otherwise the committee will never end.

SO: That was very astute of you, Sir *[laughs]*.

KJ: Yes *[laughs]*.

SO: Otherwise, as you say, the heads would have just gone back and repeated all the arguments *[laughs]* and you would never have got agreement at all.

KJ: No, I was afraid that they might have a long extended discussion on this and that.

SO: Sir, how valuable did you feel was having the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Kuala Lumpur?

KJ: I thought it was valuable in one sense, that finally we have accepted the Commonwealth as an organisation that can help the developing countries, the

poor countries, and also the island countries who had particular economic difficulties. And, for the first time, Mahathir was playing...along with Africa that countries must be helped.

SO: Sir, did you go with Dr Mahathir to the Harare meeting in 1991?

KJ: Yes, I did.

SO: So, were you pleased with the extent to which the committee of officials for the High Level Appraisal group that their recommendations were incorporated in heads' decisions?

KJ: Yes, of course, I was very pleased, yeah. We run into some difficulty with the Brits on apartheid.

SO: Indeed, I was about to ask you: Malaysia and South Africa?

KJ: Yeah the apartheid...declaration, Britain was the only one that did not subscribe to it.

SO: Sir, were you present at the meeting of the Committee of Foreign Ministers on South Africa at the KL summit?

KJ: No, I was not.

SO: I know that that was an extremely contentious meeting. It was chaired by Joe Clark, the Foreign Minister of Canada, and I know that feelings were particularly high.

KJ: No, I was not there, but certainly I was following it as a representative of Mahathir. Because he was a member of the High Level Committee, or what you call it, High Level Appraisal Committee? And there were a lot of people who said we should now start dealing with the South African regime immediately (after Mandela's release) in order not to lose out. I put this in my book, that we had invested so much in Mandela and in the ANC, and there's no turning back now on the question of sanctions and apartheid.

SO: You mention in your memoirs that there certainly were arguments from some members of the Commonwealth on the need to lift economic and financial sanctions, such as they were, and to accelerate trade. Britain, of course, had opposed the financial sanctions particularly and economic sanctions, but also Singapore opposed these measures and encouraged their lifting. Do you recall whom else argued for this, and felt that this was an appropriate way to act towards South Africa?

KJ: I can't remember what... Apart from Singapore, I don't think there's another country from the non-white Commonwealth countries who were opposed to it.

SO: So, I know that Dr Mahathir had been frustrated by, and disillusioned with, the Commonwealth in the early 80's, particularly on the question of its behaviour towards apartheid South Africa, because he felt that it was more of a 'talking shop' rather than an active body to oppose apartheid. Once Nelson Mandela was released in the February of 1990, what was Malaysia's policy through the Commonwealth to accelerate the end of apartheid?

KJ: Our job then was to get close to Mandela and to give whatever support he wanted and to give whatever support the ANC had wanted. We had given a lot of help to the ANC during that period soon after Mandela was released from prison.

SO: So was this financial help? Was this assistance with negotiations?

KJ: No, we were helping them on the – not so much of the negotiation between the SA regime and ANC, but to strengthen the machinery of ANC in terms of fighting the white African regime.

SO: When you say ‘strengthen the machinery’, what do you mean, Sir?

KJ: In terms of how the ANC should organise itself, and how the ANC should strengthen itself, and how the ANC should play a role that would take into account the people of South Africa – the blacks, of course, and as you recall, there was a little fight within ANC and Chief Buthelezi.

SO: Yes. There was a ‘little fight’ - a masterly understatement worthy of a Brit.

KJ: Yes, so we were helping them with all kinds of things in terms of things – even producing their pamphlets to be distributed

SO: So was this done bilaterally, or were you channelling it through the Commonwealth?

KJ: Bilaterally.

SO: I know that between 1990 and 1994, the Secretariat was particularly active in trying to support and promote the negotiations, and that Chief Emeka made regular visits. Moses Anafu and Max Gaylard, the Director of Political Affairs Division at the Secretariat, were sent down to South Africa to support the CODESA negotiations. You are emphasising that Malaysia had a particular bilateral relationship with the ANC?

KJ: In some ways – yes, we were doing quite differently to what the Secretariat were doing. We were working almost a party to party relationship, you know.

SO: Yes. Sir, overall, do you feel that, for Malaysia, ASEAN and the OIC were more important organisations and associations for Malaysia?

KJ: Well, ASEAN certainly is the core of the Malaysian foreign policy, and it will always remain the core of our foreign policy. It is our hope that ASEAN will become a unified economic community. So it is that important. The OIC is important in one sense, because here we are closely identified with our Muslim friends on a number of issues – in particular, the Palestine question. And this is where we ran into difficulties with the Brits. We had some difficulties with the Brits in Harare on this point. In how we should approach the Palestinian question within the Commonwealth.

SO: Sir, please could you add a little more detail on this, because it’s not widely known.

KJ: At the Political Committee, the question of Palestine came up and most of the non-white countries were concerned about the lack of support for the Palestinian people, in terms of how to help them progress towards peace. The Brits took a completely different position when we discussed the final solution to the question of Palestine obtaining its rightful homeland – right, as an independent state. The Brits were not happy with it, with the way we were pushing the Palestinian question at the Commonwealth. They thought it was a subject quite extraneous to the work of the Commonwealth countries.

SO: You were pushing essentially for the PLO to be recognised as an independent entity and for statehood?

KJ: Yes.

SO: And that was antithetical to British policy which was emphasising sectoral support.

KJ: I had locked horns with my counterpart from Britain on this. This was with Sir David Gillmore, the Permanent Undersecretary at the Foreign Office. We were having a very heated argument, me and him, at the committee meeting.

SO: This must have been an extremely acrimonious discussion. You really were poles apart because you were arguing for support and recognition of the PLO, and he was saying that, in fact, their material needs needed to be addressed.

KJ: Yes, that's right.

SO: Yes. At Harare, the decision, of course, was made for the Harare Declaration, and the emphasis in the wording of the Declaration is for 'good government'. Was this a hard fought choice of words that you recall – rather than good 'governance', because the two are not the same?

KJ: No, it was not the same, no. It was – if I remember correctly – it was not really that contentious an issue. And it was not too difficult, if I remember correctly, when that thing got through.

SO: Sir, in the 1990's, a major push for Malaysian foreign policy was to support the Bosniaks in the wars in former Yugoslavia. Your memoirs go into considerable and welcome detail on Malaysian support for your Muslim counterparts in Bosnia. This seems to be yet another policy which you found yourselves at odds with the British? The Bosnian Muslim community that was of course under attack from both Bosnian Serbs and also Bosnian Croats.

KJ: And also Serbia.

SO: And, as you say, and Serbia as well. Your memoirs underline that Douglas Hurd, the British Foreign Secretary, was arguing that the arms embargo should remain in place.

KJ: Yes.

- SO:** Did this renewed tension within the Malaysian-British bilateral relationship, feed into Malaysia's attitude of the general value of the Commonwealth for Malaysian foreign policy?
- KJ: No, it did not. No, it did not.
- SO:** Sir, how valuable do you feel are Commonwealth networks of officials and diplomats – not simply the high level meetings of heads, but actually the network of senior officials – in underpinning the work and value of the Commonwealth?
- KJ: I think they need to improve on that because, as I see, even now, not so much of – what did the Commonwealth diplomats and officials – kind of networking that you get in other organisations. For example, there is very little of networking at the UN in some Commonwealth countries.
- SO:** So you feel that this would be a valuable area that could be strengthened; that, in fact, in your time it was not particularly useful a network of officials?
- KJ: No, it is an area that must be looked into.
- SO:** Thank you for that. It also appears to me that your experience in the Commonwealth and knowledge of the Secretariat helped to feed into other areas in, say, promoting change in ASEAN. There seems to be a certain duplication of the way that the Commonwealth and its Secretariat in London had evolved, and you sought to replicate that in the...
- KJ: Yes, which I did. My ideas were accepted.
- SO:** So that was a highly conscious decision on your part to copy that?
- KJ: Yes, it was a good programme, I thought. So it was accepted by the ASEAN countries.
- SO:** And did they appreciate that you were using the Commonwealth model?
- KJ: Well, there was no dissenting voice – let's put it that way.
- SO:** Sir, you mentioned Dr Mahathir's attitudes towards to the Commonwealth and the way that the Secretary General, Chief Emeka, worked. You'd mentioned towards the start of the interview that Dr Mahathir became disillusioned as the 1990's went along?
- KJ: Yes.
- SO:** Sir, would you say then that the high point of the Commonwealth's value to Malaysia was then in 1989/1990, or did it, in fact, continue to be a useful tool in Malaysia's diplomatic toolbox?
- KJ: It continues to be a useful tool. The former Prime Minister, Abdul Badawi, became the chair of the Eminent Persons Group.
- SO:** Sir, thank you very much for your time and comments.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]