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Key:

SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

FS: Farooq Sobhan (Respondent)

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SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow interviewing Mr Farooq Sobhan, the former Bangladeshi diplomat, on Wednesday, 19th November 2014. Mr Sobhan held the position of Foreign Secretary from 1995 to 1997 and is presently the President of the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, an independent think tank in Dhaka.

FS: Welcome.

SO: Sir, if I could begin, please, by asking you of your recollections at the start of an independent Bangladesh. I understand you were a Foreign Service officer then.

FS: That's right, yes.

SO: As the purpose of this interview project is to look at the history of the Commonwealth and its role as a diplomatic actor, did you have a particular view of the Commonwealth or a particular view of the Commonwealth Secretary General, Arnold Smith, and his contribution towards Bangladesh's independence?

FS: Yes, I was quite aware of it, I would say, in the very early days. I, of course, had the pleasure of reading his book [*Stitches in Time: The Commonwealth in World Politics* (1983)], which, I should mention, was quite some time ago. But I am indeed very familiar with the important role he played both in support of Bangladesh and the admission of Bangladesh as a member of the Commonwealth.

SO: Sir, did you have first-hand knowledge of this? Or was it more that Smith's support became widely known within the Bangladesh diplomatic community?

FS: It became widely known – I wasn't directly involved in the early days when I served as Director in the Foreign Office. I was not dealing with the Commonwealth. Other colleagues were, but we were fairly small in number in those days so everyone knew pretty much everything that was happening in the Foreign Office. We were certainly aware about the important role of the Commonwealth and Arnold Smith, in particular.

SO: Did Arnold Smith involve you or work with you in any way in the approaches to other Commonwealth heads of government for Bangladesh to join the Commonwealth?

FS: This subject was, as I mentioned earlier, dealt with by other people in the Foreign Office. But I was aware and certainly knew about his support and the role that he had been playing in supporting Bangladesh's membership.

SO: Sir, where were you serving at that particular time?

FS: Well, I was in Paris in 1971 and then came back to join the Foreign Office early in 1972, shortly after the newly-established Foreign Office in Dhaka began operation.

SO: Sir, did the Foreign Office then work with Arnold Smith in terms of identifying Bangladesh's needs in its reconstruction following the War? Because there were enormous challenges...

FS: I was a relatively junior officer in those days in the Foreign Office. I was dealing with East Asia and the Americas and therefore was not directly dealing with the Commonwealth or our membership of the Commonwealth.

SO: As far as you were concerned in your professional capacity, then, at what point did you personally start to interact with the Commonwealth in its various forms?

FS: I would say that began with Sonny Ramphal, who I had the pleasure of meeting several times when he was Secretary General of the Commonwealth during his three terms. And, indeed, from 1978 – early in 1978 – until August 1981, I was Director General in the Foreign Ministry, responsible for international organisations which included, of course, the Commonwealth.

So, I was – you might say, at that particular juncture – the point man in the government insofar as the Commonwealth was concerned. I attended a number of Commonwealth meetings and had a number of meetings with the Secretary General. I attended the Commonwealth Summit in Lusaka in 1979. Even after I moved in 1981 to the UN, I continued to occasionally meet with the Secretary General – particularly on visits to London – and then again I was a member of the Bangladesh delegation at the Commonwealth Summit in Delhi in 1983. So, yes, I would say [that] during the Ramphal years I did interact very closely with Sonny Ramphal and, indeed, I would say that I continued to do so pretty much thereafter. So, I had several meetings with him and also had a close relationship with the Commonwealth when Emeka was the Secretary General. I was then, subsequently, the number two man in the Foreign Office, again dealing with the Commonwealth, and then later was the Foreign (Permanent) Secretary and again therefore had many opportunities to be involved with the Commonwealth. So, yes, I would say

pretty much from 1978 until today – which would make it, what, 36 years – I've had a very close, you might say, relationship with the Commonwealth.

SO: Sir, there are a considerable number of questions I'd like to put to you coming out of your summary of your career. Please, how much importance did you – and do you – attach to senior officials' networks in the Commonwealth?

FS: Oh, I would consider it very important, because a lot of the groundwork clearly is done by senior officials. So, we really have multiple levels at which there is contact between member states and the Commonwealth, with its work and its programmes. There is contact at the level of senior officials. The senior officials could be Permanent Secretaries, as well as people who directly deal with the Commonwealth. It will be the relevant Director in the FCO in London, and, in our case, it's the Director General (International Organisations). And then, of course, you have the interaction at the ministerial and the summit-level, depending on the activities. So, yes, I would say it's multi-dimensional and multi-faceted.

SO: You also mentioned that your first particular personal/professional contact with the Commonwealth came when Sonny Ramphal was already Secretary General. How would you describe and analyse his particular way of working, and why it was that he was a particularly effective Secretary General?

FS: In those days, the Commonwealth – for a number of reasons, at least in my view – enjoyed a high profile. It certainly struck me as an important organisation which a country like Bangladesh should take seriously. If memory holds good, with some exceptions. I remember one such exception would have been CHOGM in Auckland, which I attended but which our Prime Minister didn't. But, as a rule, our prime ministers have been quite particular about attending the Heads of Government Meeting, which is one important indication of the country's position and views about the Commonwealth.

Going back to Sonny, I would say [there are] three reasons which put the Commonwealth on the global map during Sonny's tenure as SG. One was Sonny and his personality – his articulation, and the fact that he was a recognised personality on the global scene. Secondly, there was the role that the Commonwealth played, particularly in the decolonisation process. So, you had the birth of Zimbabwe, which effectively came out of the 1979 CHOGM. You had the longstanding campaign against apartheid and, eventually, I would say, the Commonwealth – along with others, of course – played an important role in the release of Nelson Mandela and the end of apartheid in South Africa. And these were all, I would say, occasions when the Commonwealth – and I think rightly so – enjoyed a very high profile and occupied centre stage insofar as global issues and global politics were concerned.

I think there is a third point that needs to be mentioned apart from Sonny Ramphal's personality and the role of the Commonwealth in the whole decolonisation process and the campaign against apartheid. It was Sonny's initiative in setting up a number of Commissions and the very proactive role played by him and the Commonwealth in addressing some of the burning economic issues of the day, including the need for a more equitable economic order and various subjects related to it.

At the time, I moved from the Foreign Office to our UN Mission in New York. I was the Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative in our mission in New York, so we are now talking about the period August 1981 to August 1984. During this period, I was elected Chairman of the Group of 77 in New York, which is a group which speaks on behalf, at that time – I forget the exact number – some 127 developing countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America. So, the work which the Commonwealth was doing proved to be extremely useful for us at the UN, because we were engaged in a dialogue with the developed countries, the OECD countries, in trying to enter into global negotiations to restructure a number of international organisations – including the World Bank, the IMF – to set up the World Trade Organisations, to look at issues relating to decision-making at the UN, all of which, in a sense, was part of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) we were trying to promote, and which Sonny, in a sense, was a key champion of and, through his commissions, contributed significantly to the debate and to the dialogue on the NIEO.

So, another important point of contact which I had with Sonny was through the Group of 77, when I was the chairman. Within the G-77, we were also strongly promoting South-South cooperation, otherwise referred to as Economic Cooperation among Developing Countries (ECDC). And one of the ideas which I had discussed with Sonny at the time...I recall writing to Sonny to say we in the Group of 77 wanted to set up an independent commission to promote South-South cooperation and would Sonny be willing to chair such a group. We discussed that. And then, as chance would have it, I moved from New York to Malaysia as High Commissioner where I pushed this idea with Dr Mahathir, as I worked closely with him. As a part of this initiative, Dr Mahathir invited Sonny on a number of occasions to visit Malaysia, and we were able to then take this initiative to fruition with the establishment of the South Commission in 1987. And it was eventually not Sonny but Julius Nyerere who chaired the Commission, but Sonny was a member of the Commission and a very active member of the Commission, which was known as the South Commission. To this day, we have the South Centre in Geneva working on ECDC and other issues of concern to the Third World: this is a legacy of the South Commission. The South Commission produced a report, and Dr Manmohan Singh – who later became Prime Minister of India – was the Secretary General of the Commission. So, as you can see, there were a number of key Commonwealth players, so to speak, who were involved in this initiative: Dr Mahathir, Julius Nyerere, Sonny Ramphal and Dr Manmohan Singh. So, as I said, right through from 1978 onwards there was a fairly deep, if you like, engagement with Sonny and also with the Commonwealth.

SO: Sir, could I please ask you, when you were chair of the Group of 77 during your posting in New York, did you identify any undertow of opposition, disquiet or resentment among some of the members of that group towards the Commonwealth? I've spoken to other economists who said that the Commonwealth's position wasn't necessarily seen as totally helpful to the Group of 77, because it appeared to be more moderate in trying to broker or to suggest ways forward between West-South. The more radical members of the G-77, meanwhile, felt that it could be advantageous to push for a harder and more robust line, rather than to present something that was seemingly moderate, for fear that that could mean further accommodation and loss of a particular position.

FS: Well, that's a rather interesting comment. The dialogue and the meetings were taking place in New York, and so, in a sense, the Commonwealth was not directly involved in this process. So, within the Group of 77, we had different schools of thought. There were some who were quite radical in their position on the NIEO and ECDC. There were others, including myself, who were seeking, if you like, a common platform on which we could work with the developed countries or the member states of the OECD. So, I suppose you could say that my views and thinking on this would have been fairly closely aligned with those of Sonny, as reflected in the work of the Commonwealth.

What I can recall – and what we were certainly aware of – was the fact that there were a number of countries who didn't take kindly to either Sonny or to some of Sonny's initiatives. I would probably suspect Britain being foremost among them, since this was also the period when Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister. I think there was a school of thought which, indeed, in later years, became much more pronounced and visible, when you had some countries – notably, Britain, and to some extent Australia, Canada and New Zealand, popularly known as the ABC countries – who were unhappy with some of the initiatives taken by Sonny. So, it wasn't that Sonny, his initiatives and his kind of highly proactive role were appreciated by all the member states of the Commonwealth. I think there was criticism, and some of it was fairly vocal and visible, but there were others – certainly among the developing countries – who supported Sonny's initiatives.

There were initiatives taken by Sonny in support of the 'Small States', another very important initiative because, by then – I forget the exact number – some 32 countries, roughly, more than half the membership of the Commonwealth, fell into the category of small states. 25 of the Small States were small island developing states, most notably in the Caribbean, but you also had a few island states in the Pacific. We had also some states in Africa and the Indian Ocean – Seychelles, Mauritius and the Maldives – so it was quite a sizeable group. And then we had this interesting initiative of a collective representation at the United Nations. I forget the exact number – I think it was a group of five or six countries that came together to have a collective mission supported by the Commonwealth.

So, we did see a very engaged and active Commonwealth, and I suppose it's no secret that when Sonny threw his hat in the ring for the post of Secretary General of the United Nations, there were some countries which not only didn't support him but actively campaigned against him.

SO: Yes, that was in 1981. I understand Lord Carrington said that he would “personally swim the Atlantic to vote against Sonny becoming SG of the UN.”

FS: So, I was around in those days and... Yes, so, Sonny, in a sense, paid the price for his activism and support of certain causes, which were not very popular among some of the member states of the Commonwealth.

SO: Well, indeed. He certainly followed the instruction from Mrs Gandhi when he first became Secretary General, who told him, “You've got to shake it up! You've got to shake up the Commonwealth.” So, he certainly seized that remit with both hands.

Sir, if I could ask you, please, your view on this. You talked about going as High Commissioner to Malaysia and working with Dr Mahathir on a number of Commonwealth-related issues. What was your perception of Dr Mahathir's view of the Commonwealth when you arrived, and did you see it alter during the time that you were in Kuala Lumpur?

FS: I think it's fair to say that, when I arrived in Kuala Lumpur in August 1984, Dr Mahathir had a rather dim view of the Commonwealth. I think much of this probably had to do with the somewhat acrimonious relations that existed between him and Mrs Thatcher. One of the key foreign policy advisors of Dr Mahathir was a close friend – who, alas, has passed away. This was Tan Sri Dr Noordin Sopiee. Noordin, at that time, was the head of Malaysia's premier think tank, the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, ISIS – which obviously bears no relationship to the ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham] of today...

SO: **No!**

FS: ...that's currently in the news. Noordin worked closely with Dr M. I think he helped in writing some of his speeches. And so, when the issue of Dr M's participation in the Commonwealth Summit in 1985 came up, there was some talk about whether Dr M would attend it or not. Well, I would like to think that both Noordin and myself argued strongly in favour of Dr Mahathir going to Nassau. One of the reasons that we argued in favour of his participation was that this would provide an excellent opportunity for him to promote the South Commission. Later, on his way to attend the Non-Aligned summit in Harare [1-6 September 1986], Dr M met with Julius Nyerere and was able to gain his support for the idea of the South Commission.

Then, of course, at the CHOGM in Vancouver in 1987, he surprised everyone by offering to host the next CHOGM in Kuala Lumpur in 1989, where Emeka was elected Secretary General. So, it was what I would call almost a 180 degree turnaround in the position of both Dr M and Malaysia.

SO: **Sir, would you say that this reconfiguration of the Malaysian Head of State's focus on the Commonwealth was a product of advice from Foreign Service officials? I know that ISIS prepared a report arguing the pros of the Commonwealth as well as the cons, as did the Foreign Ministry in Malaysia. Had Dr Mahathir himself come to see how the Commonwealth could be used as a platform for Malaysian national interest? That is, as a way to reach out to individual African states, to promote trade and development, but also to set Malaysia more on the regional and international scene in south-east Asia?**

FS: Absolutely; 100%. One of the very interesting initiatives which Dr M took in later years was reaching out to African heads of government from the Commonwealth. And, indeed, he was involved in setting up a forum which, while not strictly under the umbrella of the Commonwealth, did have certainly some element of the Commonwealth in it – particularly since the 19 or so African countries that he reached out to were all member states of the Commonwealth. And he would meet with them regularly: once a year in Africa and once a year in Malaysia. This initiative was the Commonwealth Smart Partnership Summit. I attended one of the summit meetings as a special guest. This was during the time when I was campaigning for the post of Secretary General of the Commonwealth: I thought the Smart Partnership

was a splendid initiative taken by Dr M. It focussed on creating investment opportunities for the Malaysian private sector to invest in Africa. Indeed, I forget, but at one time, possibly during that visit to this event – it was at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe – I was told that Malaysia was the largest foreign investor in some nine or ten of the African Commonwealth member states. So, it wasn't simply a talk show, it was backed by action. There were lots of business interests involved, and so he walked the walk: that was something which I certainly gave Dr Mahathir high marks for.

SO: Sir, you say you attended a number of Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. This is a time when the press pay particular attention to the Commonwealth, and so it is certainly a highlight for the Commonwealth organisation. How far did you perceive that this question of personal contact – the personal chemistry between heads – was valuable glue for the organisation?

FS: Oh, extremely. I thought, in fact, [that] the essence of CHOGM was the interaction between the heads. The Retreat, where heads mingled without their aides... The whole dynamics of that process was what made the Commonwealth, as an organisation, unique. You now have a Retreat in some of the other regional groups and organizations like SAARC, but I would say this whole idea of the need to see the heads together in an informal setting, where they could talk to each other without aides, came out of the Commonwealth and the CHOGM process. Going back to Lusaka, it was really the Retreat where you saw Malcolm Fraser and a few others prevail on Mrs Thatcher to give ground on the Rhodesia issue, which eventually led to the birth and independence of Zimbabwe. Similarly, when I attended CHOGM as Foreign Secretary in Auckland, although I did not attend the closed door meeting, I was at Millbrook where we had the Retreat. It was the way Nelson Mandela took charge and his personality that resulted in the birth of CMAG. If it wasn't for Mandela, it was highly unlikely that the Africans would have agreed to take action against Abacha's Nigeria at that time.

SO: Yes, indeed. Sir, if I could ask about your recollections of Lusaka. You commented about Malcolm Fraser being of key importance in pressing Mrs Thatcher to go for an all-party conference. I know that there was a particular group of heads that stayed behind in Kenneth Kaunda's study with Sonny Ramphal, while others went off to the Retreat. I just wondered if you recall at what point you realised that this was going on. Does there seem to be, at the retreats, a particular core of leaders that emerge or drive business? You suggest that again, in Auckland and Millbrook, Mandela was of critical importance in persuading his colleagues. Is there a pattern of a leader/group that emerges at a retreat?

FS: I think very much so. I recall in the closed door sessions which I was privileged to attend at Lusaka, Nyerere was loud and clear on the subject of Rhodesia. He set the tone for the discussions on Rhodesia. I think that these discussions possibly prompted Malcolm Fraser to understand and appreciate the strong feeling and mood of the African Heads that were present. Mention should also be made of the role played by Kenneth Kaunda. The personality and deft handling of the summit proceedings by the Zambian President, Mr Kaunda, who was chairing the Summit, eventually led to the meeting of a group of Heads at the Retreat which resulted in the break-through. And you see this happening in other Commonwealth Summits. Of course, I'm not sure

we will ever see someone match the kind of authority commanded by Nelson Mandela at the 1995 CHOGM or see a Head of Government dominate the proceedings the way Nelson Mandela did at the summit.

SO: I understand that, at the Millbrook Retreat, there were two identified gainsayers [who were] against suspending Nigeria and the idea of CMAG: one was Robert Mugabe, and the other was Dr Mahathir. I understand from talking to Jim Bolger – who was, of course, the New Zealand Prime Minister and host of that meeting – that he and Nelson Mandela agreed to divide the responsibility of persuading these leaders between them. Mandela decided to talk to Robert Mugabe and Jim Bolger talked to Dr Mahathir to persuade them of the necessity of this.

FS: Yes, well, as I said, I was not inside the room at the Retreat, frankly, but I did get some feedback from at least one person who was inside the room. It's interesting that the person who was representing India on behalf of his Prime Minister was their Foreign Minister, Mr Pranab Mukherjee, who now happens to be the President of India.

SO: [Laughter].

FS: And immediately after the Retreat was over, the head of our delegation and I met with Mr Mukherjee and the Indian Foreign (Permanent) Secretary and we did a post-mortem on what happened. And yes, I would say I have no reason to take issue with what you've just said regarding the role of Nelson Mandela and, of course, Mr Bolger at that time.

SO: So, was that standard practice for the Bangladeshi and Indian High Commissioners and Permanent Secretaries to get together at a Commonwealth meeting to have a post-mortem from a South Asian point-of-view?

FS: As you rightly pointed out, so much of this came out of not simply your own personal contacts, but the opportunities that an occasion like the Retreat provided for people to talk to each other on the side-lines. So, we certainly seized that opportunity. Both the head our delegation – who later became Foreign Minister, Mr Morshed Khan – and myself knew Mr Pranab Mukherjee extremely well. I had served as High Commissioner to India, during which period of time I got to know Mr Mukherjee extremely well and then I knew my counterpart the Indian Foreign Secretary extremely well. So, whenever we had an opportunity and found ourselves in the same city, we would meet. In this case, we were in the same complex at Millbrook, so we did certainly seize that opportunity to spend some time together.

SO: Sir, would you say that, in addition to the contact between heads and the contact between senior officials, there's also – as far as the Commonwealth is concerned – that beneficial loop of the High Commissioners' regular meetings in post?

FS: Absolutely. Obviously, the High Commissioners have a very important role to play, and they provide guidance and set the tone. I don't know what the number is today, but I reckon we must have something pretty close to the entire membership of the Commonwealth represented in London through their High Commissioners. So, that is certainly a very important and useful platform

to sort of support the work of the Commonwealth and provide it with a certain degree of guidance.

SO: Sir, thank you for that. Please, could I ask your views on CMAG as it evolved out of the Millbrook Declaration? I am aware that, in the latter part of the 1990s, one of your key platforms in your bid to be Secretary General was indeed a reform of CMAG?

FS: Well, at one level, I was certainly all for CMAG. There were issues, in a sense, which were articulated by Dr Mahathir about this being an instrument to be used primarily by the ABC countries to interfere in the affairs of the smaller developing countries in the Commonwealth, and that this was essentially a kind of one-way traffic, so to speak. My view on this was that a small ministerial action group would be certainly very important in terms of getting people to take the Commonwealth more seriously, because otherwise it was essentially a case of the Commonwealth acquiring a certain degree of prominence and relevance only when CHOGM or the summit took place. In between, there was a kind of a vacuum. So, CMAG would, in some ways, fill that vacuum. It would also address the issue – which remains a burning issue today – of the relevance of the Commonwealth.

So, I think CMAG did, to some extent, fulfil that role, but the fact of the matter is [that] a lot of countries in the membership – particularly in Africa – had reservations because they saw this as really something which was used by the ABC countries to focus attention on some of their misdeeds: violation of human rights and Zimbabwe being, of course, the most notable cases. My view on this was that we should balance the political agenda with the economic and social agenda, so that CMAG should not simply meet to address issues relating to the violation of human rights or where democracy was being threatened, but should also address the plight of its member states – whether it's a humanitarian crisis or whether it's the need for urgent economic assistance of one kind or another.

So, in a sense, the idea was to make CMAG in to a kind of a mini-Commonwealth Security Council with a fairly broad-based mandate, and where we wouldn't necessarily have the problem which we currently face in the functioning of the [UN] Security Council, where you have five member states armed with the veto and where the Council can only act if and when all five permanent members agree on something. That, as we all know, is not very often.

SO: How much support did you get for your suggestion that you should expand CMAG into being really a mini-Commonwealth security council? At what point did you decide to stand for the Secretary General position?

FS: Oh, well, that came during my period as Foreign (Permanent) Secretary. The Commonwealth had never had a Secretary General from Asia and our Prime Minister at the time – who happens to be Prime Minister today, Sheikh Hasina – was someone who was quite committed to the Commonwealth. Part of this, of course, also goes back to the early days of Bangladesh and the fact that her father took a keen interest in the Commonwealth, and also the role played by Arnold Smith...

SO: Indeed.

FS: ...and the membership of the Commonwealth. So, when this issue of who would be the next Secretary General came up, I think we had already got some indication of the interest of the then-Deputy Prime Minister of New Zealand, Don McKinnon, in the position. Some of us took the view that it should be someone from Asia. And the Prime Minister, during the CHOGM in Edinburgh, spoke – I wasn't there, so this is second-hand information – she spoke to two persons in Edinburgh. One was Mr Gujral, then-Prime Minister of India, who again was someone I happened to know extremely well from my days in Delhi as High Commissioner. When I arrived in Delhi in 1992, he was not holding any official position and we became – if I can be so bold as to use the term – good friends. We saw each other often, and so when he later became Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, I still had the privilege of being able to see him and he remembered our earlier relationship. The same was the case with Dr Mahathir, whom I got to know extremely well during my tenure as High Commissioner in Malaysia. Reportedly, Sheikh Hasina spoke to both of them in Edinburgh. She first asked them whether either India or Malaysia were planning to field a candidate for the post of Secretary General. When they both indicated that there were no such plans, she mentioned the fact that there had, so far, been no Secretary General from Asia. She raised the issue with the two of them, in particular, because India and Malaysia were the two, in a sense, most proactive member states within the Commonwealth from Asia: Dr M, because he was such a dominant personality in Asia; in the case of India, because it was India and India, certainly, in my view, loomed large within the framework of the Commonwealth.

So she spoke to the two of them and said, 'What are your thoughts about the Commonwealth, and are you planning to field a candidate, and how would you react if I nominated Farooq for this position?' And my information – as I said, I was not there – was that she received an enthusiastic response from both Mr Gujral as well as Dr Mahathir, which eventually led to my candidature. What happened was that Dr M remained not only committed but – again, my information is [second hand] – he lobbied very actively in supporting my candidature. Unfortunately, he didn't show up at the Durban summit in November 1999 because it coincided with the run up to the General Elections in Malaysia and, therefore, reportedly, at least, the large number of Commonwealth countries – in particular, from Africa – who had promised him that they would support my candidature may not, in fact, have done so. The long and short of it is that Don McKinnon was the person chosen by the Heads of Government in the straw poll that is traditionally held to determine which candidate should be formally elected at the closed door meeting of the Heads in Durban under the chairmanship of President Mbeki of South Africa.

The other, I think, important development was that – shortly after Edinburgh – Mr Gujral ceased to be Prime Minister and Mr Vajpayee became Prime Minister. I would say that the attitude of [Vajpayee's] BJP Government at that time was not particularly helpful. I would have, frankly, based the argument in support of my candidature as hinging very much on getting the support of the Asian region behind my candidature, and, obviously, if that support was not forthcoming, then I would say it seriously undermined my chances. So, India sat on the fence. They did, eventually... I was at Durban. Our Prime Minister was told by the Indian Prime Minister that India would support my candidature and the Indian Foreign Minister told me something similar, but my own feeling was that India's support came rather late in the day, and had the Indians

come out more openly in support, as I had hoped they would, we may – I'm not saying we would – we may have seen a somewhat different outcome.

SO: Indeed. Sir, please if I could just ask you, coming out of those remarks... During your time as a leading Bangladeshi foreign service officer and leading civil servant, how had you regarded India's commitment and involvement in the Commonwealth? You have said that, in the early part of the 1990s, India was very much more involved, but then you've indicated in the second part of that decade a greater degree of distance. I'm aware that, in the earlier period, when Mrs Gandhi was Prime Minister of India, that the Non-Aligned Movement was seen to be the principal platform and vehicle for India's foreign policy, and that her successors had a varying degree of commitment to that. I'm constantly struck by India: although it is the largest democracy within the Commonwealth, it appears relatively reticent to use 'the Commonwealth' in quite the same way that Dr Mahathir came to use the association.

FS: No, absolutely. I should add [that] many years later, when the election for the Secretary General took place, I had then strongly argued – as indeed I argued when I was campaigning for the position of Secretary General – that we needed to make the Commonwealth more broad-based and that the support of countries like India, South Africa, [and] Malaysia was crucial to the future of the Commonwealth: to its relevance and to its engagement in the international community. And so, I argued [that] when India floated the candidature of Kamallesh Sharma, who is now the Secretary General, that perhaps the best way of ensuring India's engagement in the Commonwealth is through electing an Indian Secretary General. We have had an Indian Secretary General for the past seven years or so, and what is, in a sense, ironical, as far as I'm concerned, is that during most of this period we had Dr Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister of India, where we had ample evidence of Mrs Gandhi's legacy as distinct from Mahatma Gandhi's legacy. But the degree of interest and involvement and support extended by India to the Commonwealth, I think, at least in my view, left a lot to be desired.

SO: Sir, how much is that a product of India's foreign policy being shaped more by its regional interactions? By this I mean its regional interactions in the North-West with Pakistan, its regional interactions across its other frontiers with Bangladesh, the southern dimension of India's foreign policy down towards Sri Lanka, and because these regional issues have a direct bearing on Indian domestic politics. So, India's foreign policy is formulated in a very different way?

FS: Well, I suppose many issues come into play here. India is today – unquestionably – not simply a regional power, but I would look upon India as an emerging global power. So, they have a very active 'Look East' policy. Central to this is its engagement with ASEAN and the Asia Pacific region: with Japan and with China. When I was ambassador in China some 25 years or so ago, Sino-Indian trade was less than \$1 billion; today, the two countries expect their bilateral trade to cross \$100 billion in the next two years. India's relations with Russia remain close and the strategic partnership with the US has received a strong boost [with] Mr Modi taking over as PM. So, there's been a change, and India has been lobbying aggressively – albeit with limited success – for a Permanent seat on the Security Council. So, India's global agenda has, in my view, changed significantly. And I would have argued that,

if India wished, it could have made the Commonwealth a rather useful platform – a platform which India could have easily dominated rather than allowing, if you like, Australia, Britain and Canada to run the show. But the long and short of it is [that] this hasn't happened. I would basically say that there's been very little interest, and my guess is that part of this goes back to the BJP government and their strong sense of national identity, their views about the Raj – the British Raj – and I would add to that their view that the Commonwealth is essentially a legacy of the past. Therefore, over-fraternisation or support for the Commonwealth didn't quite gel with how they see the Commonwealth and its future, and my guess is that India's interest in the Commonwealth under Modi will further decline rather than increase.

So, the challenge, really, for any Secretary General, as far as I'm concerned, has always been trying to reach out to the membership as a whole – to our friends in Africa and the Caribbean and so on. And yes, there are three or four issues where I think they have carved out a niche for themselves in terms of relevance: there's the whole election monitoring process, which I think the Commonwealth does well; the support for the small states and that programme; and then, to some extent, the role played by CMAG. But it still remains an organisation where, in my view, at least, the ABC countries exercise a disproportionate influence. And a lot of this has to do with the interest and the degree of financial commitment of the other member states – most notably India and countries in Africa. So, this, once again, I think, brings to the forefront the whole issue of the relevance and what it is the Commonwealth is really all about?

SO: Indeed. Sir, that's a very good point for us to end the first part of our discussion. Thank you very much indeed.

FS: Sure, I'd be quite happy to do a follow-up.

[END OF AUDIOFILE PART ONE]