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VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Farooq Sobhan (Part Two)

Key:

SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

FS: Farooq Sobhan (Respondent)

Location: Skype Internet Call between London and Dhaka

Date: 5th January 2015

SO: Sir, your time is very precious, so thank you very much indeed for agreeing to a second discussion.

From your comments in the first interview, I would be very pleased if I could put to you questions on your view of the Commonwealth's role on trade and investment for Bangladesh, and also for the South Asian region generally. I know this is your particular area of work and I'm trying to set in context the particular value of the Commonwealth or the Secretariat and its Secretary General towards Bangladesh's own drive for development, be it in the public or private sector. How much importance would you attach to the Commonwealth as an association for sustainable development in Bangladesh?

FS: I'm afraid you will have to be prepared for...not quite a barrage, but something close to it, because this is a subject which has certainly been of enormous interest to me. So, let me take you back all the way to 1997 and the Commonwealth summit which – if my memory holds good – gave birth to the Commonwealth Business Council [CBC] with which I was, over the years, very closely associated.

As we know, at the CHOGM in Edinburgh, under the chairmanship of Tony Blair, there was a view – it was, frankly, the same old subject – on, “How do we make the Commonwealth more relevant to the membership at large [and] to developing countries, such as Bangladesh?” Some of us had been advocating the idea of getting the Commonwealth more involved in business, trade and investment and carving out a role for the private sector, because it was understood that this was something which clearly needed to go beyond the inter-governmental framework. This was also something which didn't,

strictly speaking, fall within the ambit of the Commonwealth Foundation, and so we saw the birth of the Commonwealth Business Council.

Unfortunately – and I’m being quite candid – relations between the Secretariat and the Commonwealth Business Council over the years were not always the best. On the contrary, a sort of rivalry emerged. In the early years, largely because it was a new initiative and also because they were able to get, in my view, a few heavyweights involved from the private sector – I have in mind people like Lord Cairns, Simon Cairns, who was a very prominent member in Britain in the corporate world... You also had people like Mr Rahul Bajaj from India, one of India’s leading industrialists. They had other prominent business leaders from Australia and South Africa, namely my friend Cyril Ramaphosa, and many others.

These members of the Board of Directors of CBC were, in my view, leading business personalities not only in their own countries but also globally. Their involvement in the CBC helped in mobilising support and interest in the work of the CBC throughout the Commonwealth. I attended a number of meetings of the CBC in the early years. The CBC, a few days ahead of every CHOGM, would convene a Commonwealth Business Summit, which was very well attended by representatives of the private sector from across the Commonwealth. What made the CBC Summit a special attraction was the presence of several heads of government from the Commonwealth, who would come a day or two ahead of the CHOGM and would be invited to address the Business Summit. This also provided an opportunity to those attending the Business Summit to meet the heads. It did acquire a certain relevance, but I should say that this almost inevitably meant that the role of the Commonwealth Secretariat itself was seriously diminished in the area of trade and investment. ComSec assumed, primarily, the roles of providing technical support, producing research papers, doing some capacity-building and working primarily with the government. So, you had the inter-governmental process on trade and investment under the ambit of the Secretariat, whereas the actual business promotion work and interaction within the private sector across the Commonwealth was taking place under the umbrella of the Commonwealth Business Council.

And then, if that wasn’t enough, there were one or two other initiatives. One initiative with which I was briefly associated was the Commonwealth Smart Partnership which was promoted by Dr Mahathir when he was the Prime Minister of Malaysia. In my view, the Commonwealth Smart Partnership seems to have worked extremely well. Dr Mahathir would meet twice a year with all the African heads of government – once a year in Africa, where it would rotate among the African member states of the Commonwealth, and once a year in Malaysia. These twice a year summit meetings attracted a lot of high profile businessmen from Africa and Malaysia, and a number of joint ventures resulted thanks to this Smart Partnership initiative of Dr Mahathir. In these twice a year summit meetings, you had the Presidents and Prime Ministers from Commonwealth member states in Africa present. So, it was a very high level participation [and was] attended by top businessmen, which produced some concrete results in respect of joint ventures. Malaysia emerged as the largest foreign investor in a number of these Commonwealth member states in Africa. So, we actually saw some concrete results emerge on the ground in the area of trade and investment but, in all honesty, I can’t say that the success for this goes to the Commonwealth Secretariat or the

Commonwealth Secretary General. I think these were initiatives which were quite independent of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Secretary General.

SO: Sir, I have one question. In his memoirs, Chief Emeka presents, understandably, a rather different view. He emphasises the Commonwealth Private Investment Initiative which led to the establishment of the South Asia Regional Fund early in 1998. Now, in your view, was that really of relatively little importance then?

FS: My candid answer is 'yes'. In fact, as someone who was associated with this on the margins, frankly, it had very little impact. We did do a couple of events, but I would say [these were] of very little significance. So, the perennial problem of the Secretariat was something which, in my view, was quite visible in the case of its programmes and initiatives in the area of trade and investment.

One big perennial problem was the issue of funding and resources. I think the second was that there were so many other initiatives on the table which seemed better resourced and better funded, and where there was much greater impact and resonance. So, my sense was that the role of the Commonwealth in the area of trade and investment was, to a large extent, overshadowed by the work of the Commonwealth Business Council, as well as the Commonwealth Smart Partnership.

I should say that, as someone who worked very closely with successive Heads or Directors of the Economic Affairs Division [EAD] at the Commonwealth Secretariat over a period of almost three decades, I was always impressed by the high quality of the people at EAD. But if you make a comparison between the time that Sonny was Secretary General and then compare that to Emeka's tenure as SG, and then compare that to Don McKinnon's tenure, and then compare that to the present situation, what do we see? We see an Economic Affairs Division which, in terms of numbers... I can't give you an exact figure offhand, but which was probably close to one hundred during its heyday under Sonny. Today, it's probably down to maybe ten, twelve, fourteen people. It's a mere shadow of what it used to be.

During Sonny's tenure, when I was chairing the Group of 77 in New York, we constantly referred to the work of some of the commissions set up by Sonny on the global economy, on the North/South divide, [and] on the New International Economic Order. So, the Commonwealth was very prominent in terms of the dialogue taking place at the highest level. That completely evaporated during Emeka's time. The quest during the years that followed was the effort to find a new role or perhaps a niche area. Thus we see the Commonwealth giving special attention to subjects like corruption and how to combat corruption and money laundering. There was this quest for relevance, and I think that probably did prompt people to say, "Shouldn't we have a role here for the private sector?" And it was perhaps this that resulted in the birth of the Commonwealth Business Council. As a result, when it comes to key subjects like trade and investment, we see the Secretariat becoming even less relevant, because the focus of attention on these two key issues had clearly shifted to the Commonwealth Business Council.

SO: Please, if I could just ask... I understand that the Secretariat has contracted dramatically since the heyday of Sir Sonny Ramphal, who was running a mini-United Nations in terms of the size of the Secretariat and its breadth of human skill resources. But is it also, surely, a question of the commitment of funding from member states? I know that at the meeting of the Bangladesh chapter of *The Round Table* in 2011, you yourself were arguing very strongly that there needed to be more funding for the Secretariat from India, from South Africa, from Singapore and Malaysia. When the South Asia Regional Fund was established in January 1988, there were commitments of \$108 million, but has there not been a marked gap between these commitments and actually producing money to implement mandates?

FS: I don't know of any concrete figures, Sue, but my guess is that very little of that \$108 million commitment ever actually translated into hard cash or into programmes. And, yes, funding was a big issue. I had always argued – and this was perhaps the centrepiece of my platform when I was campaigning for the post of Secretary General – that if the Commonwealth is to have relevance and importance in the world today, we really need to see many more member states playing an active role in the Commonwealth: in particular, countries like India, South Africa, Malaysia, [and] Singapore, just to mention a few. We need to get out of this ABC syndrome where member states from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific would complain about the dominant role played by the ABC countries but [then would] be unwilling to be more proactive. But the fact is that what little funding still continued to come into supporting the work of the Secretariat came from the ABC countries, so the crunch issue of getting financial support from a wider group of member states didn't really materialise. We did see some of these countries give some support for a while to the Commonwealth Business Council but, in most cases, it was corporate houses rather than governments that extended the financial support. As I mentioned earlier, the Malaysians gave their full support as well as the funding for the Smart Partnership Initiative, so they felt they were doing their bit.

As someone who has tracked India's involvement in the Commonwealth over the years, I can say that India's interest in the Commonwealth pretty much evaporated after the departure of Sonny. Sonny had an excellent personal rapport with Mrs Gandhi. I was at the Commonwealth Summit in Delhi in 1983, when Sonny got five more years as SG – without a note of dissent, thanks to Mrs Gandhi. The drafting committee – of which I was a member – was chaired by Dr Manmohan Singh, who later became Prime Minister of India. The declaration that was adopted at Delhi clearly reflected Mrs Gandhi's commitment to the Commonwealth and endorsed the role of the Commonwealth in support of a New International Economic Order, a pet subject of Sonny's.

During the tenure of Emeka, he [Emeka] invited Dr Manmohan Singh to chair one of the commissions set up by him, while he [also] invited another famous Indian economist and Nobel Prize winner, Professor Amartya Sen, to chair another commission. [Still,] India's interest in the Commonwealth never ever matched the interest shown during the years that Mrs Gandhi was in power or during the many years that her father, Pandit Nehru, was in power. We never ever saw the Commonwealth regain the kind of glory or importance or attention it enjoyed on economic issues as it did during the Ramphal years.

An area where the Secretariat did play an important role was in support of the Small States. Thirty-two of the fifty-four member states of the Commonwealth are designated as small states, mainly by virtue of the small size of the country and its population. The Small States programme did acquire a certain degree of relevance and resonance, but then we see the United Nations, having first focussed attention on the Least Developed Countries, then also extending the support of the UN and some of the specialised agencies to programmes in support of small states, which extended to both land-locked as well as island-developing countries. So, even in this niche area carved out by the Commonwealth Secretariat, I find that over the years the Commonwealth's role and its programmes have shrunk quite visibly. This is explained by the simple fact that less resources and less manpower have reduced the capacity of ComSec to be active even in key niche areas. This, in turn, has adversely impacted on ComSec's ability to mobilise interest across the Commonwealth.

So, ComSec remains an institution where the ABC [countries] continue to dominate. We, of course, have a situation currently where, for various reasons, Canada, which has been a major supporter over the years of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation [CFTC], has decided to cut back its funding to CFTC. So, the whole issue of resources continues to bedevil the work of the Secretariat.

SO: Sir, could I also ask... In addition to a diminution of resources at the Secretariat in terms of capacity, a lack of attention to trade and development, [and] the comparative importance of the Commonwealth Business Council, has the Commonwealth also been a victim of the growth of regionalism among its members? I'm referring specifically, in the case of Bangladesh, to the SAARC, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. So, if there has been an emergence of a tighter group of seven and then eight member states who are able to collaborate precisely because there is a regional focus to their activities, does this then mean a shift in international relations, as more regional associations establish themselves? Does this diminish the importance of the Commonwealth as an overarching association?

FS: Yes, absolutely. I would say that the move towards regionalism is in evidence throughout the Commonwealth. In the Asia-Pacific region, we have the Pacific Forum, we have ASEAN, [and] we have SAARC. In South Africa, we have SADC. In West Africa, we have ECOWAS, and in East Africa, we have the East African Community. And then we have CARICOM in the West Indies. And if that wasn't enough, we also have to accept that, even in the case of the ABC countries... We note that Britain, for example – and this was a big issue over the years – is willing to invest much more in its membership in the EU than it was ever willing to do in the case of the Commonwealth. NAFTA became Canada's prime focus. For Australia and New Zealand, they were members of the OECD [and] they were much more plugged into their relations with Britain and the US than they ever were with the Commonwealth. And then we see the Australians pioneering their own initiatives, two examples of this being their involvement in APEC and in the Indian Ocean Rim.

But what I had suggested, again, in this quest for relevance was [that], if we look at all of these organisations that I've mentioned, we see that we have member states of the Commonwealth actively involved. If we look at, certainly, CARICOM, virtually the entire membership of CARICOM is made up of Commonwealth member states. If we look at SADC, for example, the overwhelming majority of members are from the Commonwealth and this holds true for the East African Community. It holds true for ECOWAS and, to a lesser extent, it holds true in the case of ASEAN, where we have Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. In the case of South Asia we have India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and also the Maldives that are members of SAARC. I would like to say, "Look, where the Commonwealth can play a role is through bringing the heads of these regional organisations together, so that they can exchange experiences and can share best practices." It can be a good platform: to develop better connectivity among these regional bodies on trade and investment, in particular within the Third World. Well, this remained and still does [remain] a proposal which has simply gathered dust. I don't think anyone took it up seriously. So, we are where we are today, limping along rather sadly.

SO: Yes, indeed. With the establishment of SAARC, was there a conscious echoing of the structures of the Commonwealth in terms of setting up a Secretariat in Kathmandu and having regional offices, as well as the idea of the Secretary General? In other words, did the Commonwealth provide something of a template for this South Asian regional forum?

FS: Well, yes and no. As someone who was closely associated with the birth of SAARC – in fact, I wrote the concept paper for SAARC way back in November 1979 – to be perfectly frank, the last institution we had in mind was the Commonwealth. What we did look at very closely was the ASEAN experience and what lessons we could learn from programmes we might borrow from ASEAN. But, having said that, yes, we followed the practice of the Commonwealth in having a Secretariat, but the SAARC Secretariat is a very different kettle of fish compared to ComSec.

The SAARC secretariat has a Secretary General. He has eight Directors, one each from the eight member states who are on secondment for a period of three years from their Foreign Office. Each of them, I reckon...The number of subjects covered by SAARC would now number in the region of twenty-plus, so each Director gets two or three subjects to look after.

In my view, it's been a very unhappy arrangement. The Secretariat is very poorly funded. In the early years, we fought battles over strengthening the Secretariat. There was strong resistance from the Indians who wanted to keep it weak and feeble and poorly funded. The Secretary General was there for two years and, with great difficulty, we got his term extended to three years, but the SAARC Secretariat has been an even weaker institution or organisation than the Commonwealth Secretariat. It should also be noted that the Commonwealth Secretary General enjoys a much higher status than the SAARC Secretary General, and his discretionary powers are far greater than the SAARC Secretary General, who has virtually no authority to take any initiative without the approval of all eight member states.

We have a lot of interest to support SAARC now from the World Bank and all the major countries from the US to China to Japan, but the Indians have not

been very supportive of the idea of giving a role to outside powers to support the regional cooperation process. There seems to have been some shift, recently, in the Indian position. They seem now quite willing to allow the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and others to play a role, but we still have to see what actually happens on the ground.

The second point is the Summit and the format of the Summit. We do have a retreat along the lines of the Commonwealth's retreat. The Summit itself, unfortunately, is much more in the nature of a structured meeting with set speeches by the heads of government. Frankly, we've tried very hard over the years to change the format of the Summit but without success, because the heads of government seem quite keen to deliver long speeches singing the praises of regional cooperation, presenting a catalogue of their hopes and expectations for the region. The speeches are all milk and honey, and then nothing happens after that. So, as someone who has been intimately associated with this whole exercise, the attention has now shifted within the region to specific projects. So, we see some activity in the area of energy co-operation, [and] in the area of connectivity, trade and investment. But these projects are taking place outside the framework of SAARC, with two or three countries coming together, looking at an opportunity and then moving forward with help possibly from the World Bank or ADB to implement a particular project.

So, SAARC itself is going through an evolutionary phase. Another major problem which impeded the progress of SAARC was the India/Pakistan problem, so I would frankly say that at no juncture did we ever look to the Commonwealth as an example to follow. For us, it has always been ASEAN, since they're our next-door neighbour, and, to some extent, the European Union. A fair amount of work has been done in the way of research and comparative analysis, but it has always been ASEAN and the EU, never the Commonwealth.

SO: So, you were looking more at the EU model and the ASEAN model in the diplomacy of trying to establish a South Asia free trade area to lower tariff and non-tariff barriers?

FS: Correct. And that, too, in a sense, has acquired its own dynamics, because we now have a situation where you might say SAFTA has become largely irrelevant. India has a free trade agreement with Sri Lanka, and India is providing duty free access which it had done earlier for Nepal and Bhutan. It has now also done so in the case of Bangladesh and the Maldives. So, for all of us, we now have duty free access to the Indian market. This is indeed a big step forward. What we're now struggling over is the issue of the removal of non-tariff barriers and moving forward in the area of road, rail, and sea connectivity, which has been totally neglected over the years. We are now focussed on specific projects, and although India has given duty free access to all the countries – with the exception of Pakistan – progress within the framework of SAARC continues to be impeded because of the India/Pakistan divide. So, SAARC continues to limp along. We've seen progress in some areas, but we are now really going much more in the direction of sub-regional co-operation rather than regional co-operation.

SO: Sir, in terms of the relevance of the Commonwealth, I made reference to the 2011 meeting of the Bangladesh chapter of *The Round Table* where,

in addition to recommending that there should be pressure for more funding for the Secretariat, you also recommended permanent Election Commissioners. I wondered... What was the origin of your thinking there?

FS: In support of full disclosure and full transparency, you're very gracious in giving us the fig leaf of *The Round Table*, but these were really my ideas which I had propounded as far back as 1998-99 when I was campaigning for the post of Secretary General of the Commonwealth. So, I repeated some of these ideas and no one seemed to object violently to these ideas. But it goes back to this whole issue of the relevance of the Commonwealth, and one area where the Commonwealth has done good work has been in the area of observing elections, providing support, [and] building the Election Commissions in different countries, including my own. This was an area where the Commonwealth had built up a track record. We [the Commonwealth] had done work with Election Commissions [and] we'd sent election observers to a number of countries, with remarkably good results. There was strong acceptance. I know that I speak for Bangladesh [when I say that], during the four free and fair elections that we've had over the years, we have always reached out to the Commonwealth for support, and that support has been available.

My point was that – again, as someone who was associated with some of the work – one of the problems the Commonwealth always faced with election observers was getting people to agree to join an election observer mission at short notice. So, I thought [that] if you have a permanent panel of observers then it makes this process of looking for people to sign on less arduous. Then, with perhaps twenty Commonwealth Election Observers on this panel, action to mobilise a team of observers will be much easier. The twenty members would be selected by the Secretary General in consultation with member states. Every two years, five observers from the panel can step down to be replaced by five new observers. The Commonwealth's Panel of Election Observers could then become a prestigious body. So, for example, if Bangladesh has someone who's a member of the Commonwealth's Panel of Election Observers, this will be considered a feather in the cap of the individual as well as the country. So, it was [with a mind] to institutionalise this practice, to give it more prominence and to make life easier for the Secretariat that I put forward this proposal.

In my view, ComSec generally faces two problems in putting together a team of election observers. First is the issue of funding, and second is the challenge in finding the right people and that, too, at short notice. This has always been something of a challenge for the Secretariat. So, if you have a fixed panel of Election Observers, it should be easier to get some funding for its work, and an election observer mission can be mobilised at short notice.

SO: Sir, when you were campaigning for the position of Secretary General, what was the reaction to this important idea?

FS: Well, as I went round the Commonwealth and said all these things, my sense was – to the best of my knowledge – [that] everyone warmly endorsed all these ideas and suggestions. It cost them very little to endorse what, at that time, were just ideas, and so no one seriously questioned it. I think, for them, the much more important issue was not the ideas that I put forward or for

anyone to say, “We would like to elect Farooq because he’s put better ideas on the table than Don McKinnon has.” I think that was never the issue in terms of who should we support. It may well have, perhaps, resonated with one or two people, but at the end of the day, it was always other factors that determined their preference. The issue was more what New Zealand was bringing to the table as compared to Bangladesh. How much support was New Zealand able to mobilise compared to Bangladesh? I don’t think any country ever gave much importance to the issue of ideas. Although... It is fair to add that, for a number of developing countries, the argument that there had never been a Secretary General from Asia struck a sympathetic chord.

SO: Sir, please, could I ask you about your involvement in the work of the Ramphal Commission on Migration and Development? I’m aware that you are a Patron and also that you were one of the Ramphal Commissioners investigating the easing of Visa requirements for business travellers and tourism. This was a report, supported by the Secretariat, which you prepared for submission to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2013. What was the diplomacy around that particular Visa project of 2013?

FS: First of all, about migration and development... Obviously, the right person to talk to about both these initiatives of the Ramphal Institute would be our mutual friend Richard [Bourne], and also Patsy [Robertson], but I can give you my ten cents worth as a Ramphal Commissioner.

Firstly, the idea of setting up the Ramphal Institute was to honour Sonny Ramphal and to try and develop some capacity to do research which could compliment and support the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat – in some ways, reviving some of the things which Sonny himself did under the umbrella of the Commonwealth when he was Secretary General. Now, because of resource constraints and so forth, it may be more difficult and problematic to do those things, hence the rationale for the Ramphal Institute.

We took up migration and development because this is a subject of enormous importance. I would venture to say to the entire membership of the Commonwealth [that], “You are almost, without exception, either a receiving country or a sending country in terms of the movement of persons.” Moreover, remittances received by most of the member states are of enormous importance to the economic growth and development of these countries. There is also the issue of ‘brain drain’ and ‘brain gain’, and then there’s the issue of the Commonwealth melting pot and the fact that Britain today reflects the Commonwealth as a melting pot of the entire membership. I thought we did some very interesting work. I still believe that one of the most important subjects for the twenty-first century, on the global agenda, is the subject of migration and development. Whether we like it or not, people will move in search of a better life. The key issue is: under what terms and conditions do they move? Under the terms of reference of the Commission, we covered a wide range of issues such as the importance of remittances, the need for skills training, problems faced by migrant workers, the role of diasporas, education, etc.

On the issue of Visas, well, this came out of a very practical problem that a number of countries – including my own – were facing. On the one hand, all the member states are very keen to promote business, trade and investment,

but on the other hand, it has becoming increasingly difficult for nationals of the overwhelming majority of member states to get visas to enter certain Commonwealth countries, most notably Australia, Britain and Canada. Even in other parts of the world, getting visas to go to India or to Pakistan or even my own country, Bangladesh, can pose problems.

As you know, this idea of looking at easing visa restrictions was the recommendation of the Eminent Persons Group. The Commonwealth Secretariat entrusted the Ramphal Institute to undertake the work and I was invited by the Ramphal Institute to visit Canada, Australia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia as one of three Commissioners entrusted with meeting a select group of countries. During my visit to the six countries – including my own – I was able to meet Senior Officials and, in some cases, the relevant Cabinet Ministers. The response I received was quite encouraging, on the whole. There was support for easing visa restrictions for businessmen. We were promoting the idea of the APEC Business Card where, once you go through a process of vetting, you get a business card and that entitles you to a three-year or five-year multiple entry Visa. And so, for businessmen, travel becomes a lot easier, especially since businessmen frequently need to travel at very short notice and may need to visit a particular country at regular intervals.

Everyone endorsed this idea, but in some cases with a few caveats. The issue with the Canadians was that, “We are tied at the hip to the Americans because we have all kinds of agreements with them, and we can only move at the pace at which the Americans will feel comfortable.” But in principle, they said yes, the APEC Business Card was a good idea, and if we could adopt something similar for the Commonwealth this would be a step forward. I got similar responses from all the countries I visited, so the recommendation we made was that the Commonwealth should try and adopt a visa programme along the lines of the APEC Business card. I think the decision at CHOGM in Colombo in 2013 was that the ComSec would do some further work on our recommendations with a view to taking it forward, or that at least some Commonwealth member states could sign on to a Commonwealth Business card or something similar.

SO: Sir, did your fellow commissioners – Dr Michael Frendo and Dr James Jonah – similarly receive broad support from the countries that they visited? Or did they identify a particular resistance?

FS: My understanding is [that] they did receive similar support, but I believe you're much better off having a chat with Richard.

SO: I'll do that. I just wondered if, when you came to compare notes with your fellow Ramphal Commissioners, whether one of you had encountered a much more hostile reception to such ideas. I will certainly pursue this question with Richard.

So, it seems that this idea was tabled to the CHOGM but – like so many recommendations – it seems to have been pushed on to the backburner? This was something that was ‘taken under review’?

FS: Correct. It's really for the member states to push this forward. What I can say is that I did keep the Bangladesh government fully informed about both the

work that I did for the Commission on Migration and Development and, later, the work I did on visas. In both cases there was strong support from the Bangladesh Government, both in Perth [at the 2011 CHOGM] – for the work which we did on migration and development – and also in respect of easing visa restrictions at [the 2013] CHOGM in Colombo. The Commonwealth Secretariat was asked to take appropriate follow up action in both cases. It is really now up to the Secretariat and the membership because, whilst there may be some countries that were very enthusiastic, there were others that had reservations. Maybe those reservations were muted in terms of the consultations that I carried out and those of the other commissioners. [But] in terms of actually giving the proposal legs and substance, without their full support and backing, I don't see very much happening.

SO: Sir, I have two questions. First, given your involvement in foreign affairs for over thirty years, what is your view of the value of the Commonwealth's quiet diplomacy around the fringes of the UNO, in the run up to the annual General Assembly meeting which takes place every September? And, secondly, what is your view of the role and value of the Commonwealth going forward?

FS: On the issue of quiet diplomacy... Yes, in a number of cases in Africa and the Pacific – even in South Asia – we have seen the Commonwealth play an important role in trying to resolve some internal problems through quiet diplomacy. This is really very much a matter for member states themselves to decide whether they would like to welcome the good offices of the Commonwealth or whether they would prefer the good offices of the UN or both.

I know Bangladesh has, on more than one occasion, welcomed the good offices of the Commonwealth, and I would say, certainly, on one occasion, we nearly pulled it off in the sense that we came within a millimetre of being able to reach a consensus on a very touchy and difficult political problem. In October-November 1994, Sir Ninian Stephen, the former Governor General of Australia, spent nearly six weeks in Dhaka as Special Envoy of the Commonwealth in an effort to broker an agreement on the composition of the caretaker government under whom the next elections – due in February 1996 – would take place. So, I'm all for continuing this particular role of the Commonwealth, but, as we know, this is something which depends largely on member states themselves. There will be those who would welcome it and there will be those who would have reservations about it.

With regard to the future of the Commonwealth, my view is, yes, I am still a strong believer and supporter of the Commonwealth. I think it does have a role to play, but I think we need to go back to addressing this issue of relevance. How do we make the Commonwealth more relevant to the membership as a whole, rather than just to a handful of countries? And I think we do need to revisit issues like the role of the Commonwealth in terms of certain key institutions, whether it's in the political sphere or in the economic and social spheres. We need to take a hard look at the recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group. I think there is still a very important role for the Commonwealth to play, but we need to give it a push. I think we need to see how we can reach out to the membership as a whole, and that will be a big challenge for whoever succeeds Kamallesh Sharma.

SO: Do you feel that the issue of the Headship is, in any way, relevant to the future of the Commonwealth? Or is it a distraction? Does having as Head someone who happens to be the current British Monarch give an image of a relatively outdated institution in the twenty-first century?

FS: This is one of those difficult questions. I would be inclined to think that Her Majesty the Queen has certainly been a huge plus point for the Commonwealth. It certainly has contributed significantly to giving the Commonwealth a certain degree of visibility. But, at the same time, I would think the issue of whether we need to continue this practice – and, if so, in what form – I think this is something the membership needs to address: whether we need to have, as we do at the moment, a permanent Head of the Commonwealth for life, as is the case at present. Do you need to have someone who is there for a fixed tenure, [or should] the current Chair of the Summit assume this role of the Head of the Commonwealth? Or, do we need a Head of Commonwealth at all? It's really not for me to say. It's for the member states to sit down and discuss this and try and arrive at a consensus.

SO: Sir, just to conclude then...How far do you feel that the future of the Commonwealth – its strength and viability – lies with its professional and civil society organisations, rather than with the inter-governmental heads of government aspect of the association?

FS: Yet again, I've always seen this as a kind of partnership. I think the non-governmental half of the Commonwealth has been a very important part of it. They constitute a very important part of the Commonwealth, and I have always seen this as a partner relationship between the inter-governmental process and the non-governmental process. A number of these Commonwealth organisations and associations have played an important role, and that's really where the strength of the Commonwealth comes from. We need to revisit this aspect of the Commonwealth to see how we can further strengthen some of these organisations.

I believe civil society has a very important role to play, and civil society organisations in the Commonwealth need to be further encouraged. But having said that, we need to also accept the fact that in many parts of the Commonwealth, some of these organisations – particularly those that might focus on human rights and freedom of the press – can be strong critics of [those] governments that [they] believe are violating some of the fundamental principles endorsed by all Commonwealth member states, most notably at the Commonwealth Summits at Singapore, Harare and Auckland.

SO: That was the very thought which was coming to my mind just as you were speaking. Sir, thank you very much indeed for your time. I'm extremely grateful for these frank comments.

FS: My pleasure, Sue. Thank you.

[END OF AUDIOFILE PART TWO]