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VOICE FILE NAME: COHP (Ambassador Muchkund Dubey)

Key

PM = Interviewer (Professor Philip Murphy)

MD = Respondent (Ambassador Muchkund Dubey)

PM: This is Philip Murphy speaking to Professor Ambassador Dubey on 4 July 2014. Ambassador, thank you very much for speaking to me. The purpose of the project is to record the views of senior officials, diplomats, ministers and people involved in the unofficial Commonwealth, on the value of the Commonwealth since the creation of the Secretariat in 1965. You were Foreign Secretary at a very interesting time, as so many different things were going on in the world: the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the First Gulf War. I'm sure you had much more to think about than the Commonwealth, but I'd be very interested in your broader views about the role of the Commonwealth and Indian engagement in the Commonwealth. In your earlier diplomatic career, before you became Foreign Secretary, what were your dealings with the Commonwealth and your impressions of the Commonwealth?

MD: I'll go back to the interview in which I appeared to qualify for the foreign service. In those days it used to be the practice that individual interview [was] followed by [a] group interview. So some six or seven candidates would be interviewed individually and then together to discuss a particular subject. So in my group the subject they put for discussion was should India leave the Commonwealth?

[Laughter].

PM: And in what year was that please?

MD: That was 1957. So two things that happened created a very negative impression in the country about whatever legacy that was left of the British Empire and in some quarters the Commonwealth was viewed as a kind of carrying forward that legacy. One was, of course the Suez War, which was very fresh in the minds of all of us. It had just happened when we got interviewed, and the other one, of course, the Indian balance of payment problem and moving away from the sterling balance to managing its own reserves and economy. My answer to that question is that I quoted Jawaharlal Nehru, and I said that he has said that 'in this divided world the more forums we have of bringing nations together for peace and co-operation, the better it is for the world and this is one of the reasons why I would like India to be in the Commonwealth', and I quoted that at the interview. And the other argument I gave is that, "The Suez War is not something which has been raised by the British people. It has been raised, or started by the government that is in power and you should not confuse the government that is in power with the nation and the tradition of that nation" and I very handsomely quoted Aneurin Bevan in the British Parliament when he'd declared the Suez War as Eden's private war; and he also said in one of his speeches in Parliament that England fought a war to save Jenkins' Ear and now we are fighting a war to save Eden's Face.

[Laughter].

MD: I quoted all these things in my interview, because I was a very avid reader of the *New Statesman* in those days, to which I used to subscribe as a student from the first years of my university days. So this is how it began, and then, of course, I came face to face in dealing with the problems meeting with the Commonwealth when I came back to Delhi as Additional Secretary; then I became Secretary, then I became Foreign Secretary. One of the things that Commonwealth Secretaries were doing very well those days, particularly under the leadership of Shridath Ramphal was to anticipate developments in the world... you know, to think on behalf of the community of nations, anticipate problems and in its own way and from its own vantage position, try

to suggest strategies to deal with it. And this it was trying to do through a series of very high level groups that were set up from time to time. To study different problematics, global problematics - actually there was an excellent report on international monetary policy at about that time. Another group that had been set up was on the crisis in the world economy at that time and he nominated me as a member of that group, though I was very actively in the service and I expressed my reservations about it, but he insisted. I could not attend a single meeting. The group completed its work and they ask me to go through it [and] to sign it and I said "look, even if I agree with that, it would not be proper for me to sign it" and I requested them to remove my name from those who signed the report and they did that; but that is one way in which I was associated. But at that time I attached and I still attach considerable importance to this kind of initiative that was taken: looking at the world from the vantage position of this group of countries, analysing it for the benefit for the rest of the world and suggesting a strategy; that was done through a series of such reports. I don't know if the tradition has been kept up until now.

The other thing, of course, was that at the time when I was Foreign Secretary, I accompanied Rajiv Gandhi to the Vancouver Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and there, of course, my role really was to craft his speech in consultation with the other people who were assisting him and basically, as you very rightly pointed out, that was the time when the Cold War was just about to end. Signs of the new era had already appeared through a number of developments, particularly in Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall and all that, and the movement towards democracy had started in large parts of the world, because the end of the Cold War coincided with some very far reaching agreements on disarmament, the solution of some problems which had appeared intractable - El Salvador, Nicaragua, Angola, etc. - and this movement was democracy and increasing recognition of human rights and democracy of the time. So basically I crafted his speech around that, along with my other colleagues and I remember that.

After that, or may be before that, one of the main emphases in the programme of the Commonwealth has been to observe the human rights situation, mainly in the Commonwealth countries and outside also. Now to what extent in the individual cases they have been able to take a joint view is very difficult to say, because the differences start once you deal with a

particular country's case, but if you deal with it at a global macro-level - promote democracy as such, promote human rights as such - then there is a good chance of coming together and I think that that was taking place at the time and subsequently even the condition for remaining in the Commonwealth, condition for hosting important events of the Commonwealth, were the conditions that you did not detract in any major way from democratic values by your own democratic problems. There was even a kind of a moral and legal back-out in the sense that meetings were cancelled... I think that it gathered momentum, even started from that time and it continues today, and I think that this is an important role which the Commonwealth can play.

I have the feeling that this is not being played energetically - as energetically as it used to be done some years ago - perhaps because other factors have appeared on the scene and they are competing. For example, the Human Rights Commission has become more active after it was converted into the Human Rights Commission Council and when it moved from the jurisdiction of the Economical Social Council to the General Assembly, because of these factors... then you will have these global NGOs in the field of human rights, which are spread larger and which command some authority in the world, and they do their own watching, they do their own reporting which influences the world. So there is a great deal more of competition in this area than it used to be at that time. At that time the Commonwealth played a very distinct role in that area and I think that there is a case for re-thinking about it and seeing how it can be revived.

PM: How do you think that it might be revived? What would your remedy be for the problems at the moment?

MD: I think that there is a lot of confusion in the thinking of groups in different parts of the world on what these values are. It can be seen in the Third World countries to have dismissed democratic values based on the so-called Westminster Model, but finding the model of inter-state relationships on the American model without knowing what is going to replace that. I think that the fact is that democratic values are universally recognised in the world today. They were developed in the Western democracies and from there they got universalised. The roots are in the philosophical thinking of that civilisation and in these parts of the world, but as they have been socialised, legalised

and universalised today. They are mainly formulated and articulated in the Western countries. And so I think there is a need for one initiative - maybe it needs to be taken by the Commonwealth - to have an international debate on that and have a common ground on that, so that you know what you are defending. Rajapaksa also thinks he is spreading democracy and he has his own notion. In many developed countries [we know] the importance of majorities consciously safeguarding the interests of the minority and going out of the way to do that: doing a kind of a rapprochement with the minority to behave, work and act as though they are one with them. This is something which is not done in most of the democracies in the developing world. So I think many of the norms and some of these principles can be agreed upon within the Commonwealth forum and it could be elaborated further to take care of some of the very discouraging departures that have been made in Sri Lanka or could be made here under this in-coming government. That could be a great service, to my mind.

PM: You mentioned Sri Lanka. What was your view of Manmohan Singh not going to the last Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting?

MD: Well, that is basically a question of strategy and diplomacy. I think that my own view is that one should not shun meetings, in spite of the adversity of the situation. That's the reason why I believe that we should have... the dialogue with Pakistan should never have stopped. I wrote a book two years ago. I have a separate chapter on dealing with neighbours and I have said that in no circumstances should the dialogue stop and I have given the reason that the kind of suspicion that it creates with the small members being give the impression of being neglected and insulted, and then suspicion leads to counter-action and counter-action could be very, very damaging. All kinds of adverse outcomes arise out of this hiatus and I think that even if there is something like the attack that happened in Mumbai, no leader should have really said that "we are not doing to have the dialogue until you do that", even if you want to say it. The best thing to say is "we will stop discussions for the time being, let things normalise, we will think about that." So leadership should be visionary and far-seeing, rather than just responding to the people. Then there is no difference between an ordinary politician and a statesman, and what we need in this world are statesmen, which we used to have from time to time in the past.

PM: Yes.

[Laughter].

PM: In terms of India's relations with its neighbours, do you think the Commonwealth networks have been useful in that diplomacy?

MD: Again, I would say that there are rival institutions. Now, for example, in South Asia, one rival is the SAARC, so a forum where you harmonise views and take a common view instead of the Commonwealth organising that. It could have been done in the absence of SAARC. It is now being done by SAARC. So there is the thing, that other institutions have emerged and it is really very important for the Commonwealth to think about what it could have as a USP. So two I have pointed out: looking at the world from the perspective of this group of countries and making that analysis available to the world and putting across the strategy following from that, and the other is what I just said this morning. The third one I would like to say is that what struck me those days about the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth's laudable work was quickly filling in the vacuum of enabling developing countries to formulate policies in areas where they interacted at an international level, particularly policies in UNCTAD and GATT, and the Commonwealth was doing extremely good work at that time. You know that the first institution to make experts available to developing countries to analyse the educational implications and formulate domestic policy was the Commonwealth and they had some studies commissioned, they had experts made available.

I remember that one of my Joint Secretaries, with whom I worked, who was an extremely competent officer. He didn't come from IES, and he was the expert in the Commonwealth Secretariat on this issue and he worked for a long time, even from India and then from Geneva and he then gave extremely valuable service to this to a large number of different countries. So I think that that role, of course. UNCTAD had a big programme of spreading *[development assistance]* out, but one should look at that kind of role. One of the major issues today which the Commonwealth Secretariat should look at today are the FTAs: FTAs, bilateral FTAs which have proliferated in Asia, including a number of convert countries. In developing countries [it is a

question of] regional FTAs and the multilateral FTAs: a job being negotiated like TPP and now how TPP or transatlantic would be placed in the international trading system. Does it supersede the international trading system? What will the consequences? Because basic rules are still there, and it's a very messy area. I think what is the remarkable thing about Ramphal was he used to anticipate this and used to take the initiative to study it, and that should happen even now, you know. I'll tell you an interesting incident. I was very actively involved in the negotiations on multilateral economic issues: that was my strength in the foreign service, so much so that at one stage my colleague said that "you are so much on the economic side that you will never become the Foreign Secretary. They will dub you as a one-issue person", but I persisted with that, particularly in the UN system and I saw that in my second assignment to Geneva, which was in 1982-85. I was not able to negotiate but the counter-attack on UN activism by the major developing countries was because of a variety of factors, one of them being that in their own domestic policy, Thatcher and Reagan wanted the state to get off the back of the people. The intergovernmental system also became suspect and therefore the very serious... I have done very serious negotiations, when I was Deputy Secretary and Under Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce and I used to go the Geneva in the first UNCTAD.

In the second UNCTAD I became Deputy Secretary and I can write a book on just my memories of what I negotiated with great pride and delight, but in my second assignment for three years, 1982-85, I could not negotiate anything at all. On the basis of my experience I wrote an article which was published in *Mainstream*. *Mainstream* was more prestigious than it is today because the editor was an outstanding historian from Oxford, Nikhil Chakravarty. He left the Communist Party in 1950 and he started the publication and he still edited it. So that article was published in *Mainstream*. When I was in Geneva, I got a call from Ramphal from London saying "Muchkund, is really true that you are not negotiating anything? The tables have been turned: that it's reversed?" And I said that "I can tell you numerous examples which I could not give in the article because I am still in the government service and I am still negotiating". So there is the kind of antenna that he used to have in different parts of the world.

[Laughter].

PM: I think one of our findings already is how important the personality of the Secretary General is in making the Commonwealth work.

MD: Absolutely. Incidentally, Kamalesh [Sharma] was my Joint Secretary when I came here as Additional Secretary, and we did the first evaluation of India's economic assistance to developing countries, mainly neighbouring countries and so a very good friend... but you know Ramphal was a class apart, no doubt about that.

PM: What was your sense of Ramphal's successor, Chief Anyaoku?

MD: Anyaoku was a very amiable person. A man who can be relied upon to find a compromise. He would not antagonise. He would not join issue confrontationally, but he would always try to find a way out. I think that he was inherently a compromiser and that is a very good quality. He had the quality to a degree which really marked him out from others and I respected him for that; but that doesn't allow a clash of ideas from which new ideas emerge.

PM: A couple of questions just taking you back to 1987 and Vancouver: Rajiv Gandhi seems to have been far more enthusiastically engaged with the Commonwealth than his mother had been. Would that be a fair assessment?

MD: Exactly. I think that one of the reasons was that she was in a period when the feelings against the Empire was still there to some extent and then she was an imperial Prime Minister, as somebody said, 'dreaming of her own importance' in the world. But Rajiv during this period was very interesting, because everything was in flux and there were many places where very good and important work was being done. There was a ground for taking initiative, showing alternative way of doing things, because the old ways were turning and he came at that time and he had some advisors and I regard myself as one of them. I think that among all the Prime Ministers that I worked with, I worked with him the longest, but not as a Foreign Secretary; I worked with him when I was Secretary. I became Foreign Secretary with V P Singh, but he used to keep me engaged and I think some of his most important

initiatives have come from me. I don't know if anybody has told you that the Rajiv Gandhi action plan was written by me.

PM: Yes.

MD: And similarly many other things...[for example] the G15, which he launched in Belgrade was drafted by me and the man... This young man was looking for initiative. He used to feel dissatisfied when things were not moving, but sometimes he wanted to move things for the sake of moving, which proved fruitless subsequently; but sometimes if people around him gave him really good ideas, he was able to grasp their significance and grab it, and that's how I was able to interact with him. Very, very important. After this Rajiv Gandhi action plan, we organised one of the world's biggest NGO conferences on disarmament to sell our action plan in Delhi and it was done entirely by me. We got four books out on disarmament at that time, but this is not off the record, but I found he suddenly lost interest and that is the time when Bofors was indirectly catching up on him. It was playing heavily on his conscience somewhere and I suddenly found him losing interest in the entire initiative.

PM: Were you close to his policy towards Sri Lanka as well?

MD: Very close, but I was closer to that in the time of the V P Singh government, because the withdrawal from Sri Lanka was being negotiated by the Joint Secretary in the Secretariat, Ronen Sen, who later on became our Ambassador in so many places: Bonn, Moscow, Washington and Minister in the Sri Lankan government. But there was an ambivalence about the Indian position. They were not very... determined to withdraw. They wanted to extract the price or whatever it is, but when the new government came which made me Foreign Secretary, it was a very interesting incident. The new Foreign Minister, Mr Gujral, called the three Army Chief[s], the three Intelligence Chief[s], [and the] Foreign Secretary at his residence and he had not moved to his official residence. Suddenly he calls me, and I was Secretary for International Relations, and he said "You prepare a blueprint for withdrawal and post-withdrawal , and we will discuss that." So that was what they wanted to do. So I told him that "Sir, it is very embarrassing because the Foreign Secretary is to deal with neighbours, and I am Secretary dealing with international organisations. How do you expect me to prepare this thing?"

Then he gave me some hint of his desire to make me Foreign Secretary and I prepared that note. That began the basis for discussion and decisions how to withdraw. When they came to power one of the principal tasks they entrusted to me was to bring that negotiation to finality. When I went in special military planes to Colombo three or four times, I negotiated with the gentleman who at one time was both Foreign Minister and Defence Minister and he was also killed by the LTTE. I basically negotiated with him.

PM: And again, doing back to the Vancouver Heads of Government meeting: could you tell me a little bit about your broader impressions of that meeting? How it was run? The issues? It coincided with the second coup in Fiji. Do you find the CHOGM a useful experience...?

MD: An extremely useful experience, very, and because the things were kind of changing or on the verge of major changes and therefore the opportunity for Heads of Government to think ahead on what could be the unique contribution of this group of leaders and countries to the international order that was evolving. That was the main preoccupation and I applied my mind basically to that; that was reflected in a few interventions by the Prime Minister and his speech there. The Fiji thing was very much left to the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of State who accompanied him, and he handled it in that meeting.

PM: How did relations with the Commonwealth relate to India's relations with Great Britain?

MD: I think that there is a very important relationship in the sense that it enhances the chances of working together through the Commonwealth. And hence the importance of the Commonwealth. But if the country which hosts the Commonwealth and which is headed by the monarch, if it then continues to have a tense relationship with a country like India... and after all, if we have a consensus, an understanding, it is the really developed by three or four countries which are very active together and these two countries will always play a very important role. Therefore good relationships between these two countries would be a very important factor in enhancing the stature of the Commonwealth and investing it with more important role and getting more measured initiatives taken through this forum.

PM: What were your relations like with British Foreign Ministers? Did you meet many of the British Foreign Secretaries at the time?

MD: Yes, I had an official visit to the UK when I encountered my counter-part and called on the British Foreign Secretary, but I never dealt directly with any Foreign Secretary.

PM: Yes, it was the Minister who was dealing?

MD: The Minister. Then my counter-part came to this part of the world. He first visited Japan, then came to India and I hosted him and I discussed a whole host of subjects with him. I remember a very interesting joke he told us. He said one of his Ministers was delivering a speech and was being translated by a Japanese [translator]. So he would first translate it into Japanese. He himself was delivering his speech and then into English and then he was introduced as the Permanent Under-Secretary. He was turned into a "junior typist" [by the translator].

[Laughter].

PM: How important was it to have senior Indian diplomats within the Secretariat in Marlborough House - people like Muni Malhotra, Krishnan Srinivasan? Was that helpful in terms of Indian diplomacy, do you think?

MD: Yes, very much so, because I think Krish was one of the very few persons after he came back here to carry the message of Commonwealth and he wrote some very interesting articles on the importance of Commonwealth during the subsequent years whenever the occasion arose. I still keep in touch with him. He lives in Calcutta and he writes prolifically for the *Statesman* and also he has now got three/four books published. Moni of course went at a relatively junior level and he rose to the position, but Krish was already senior. He had already served as Foreign Secretary. I think that Krish was the best spokesman of the Commonwealth here in this country. Still is.

PM: Yes, and we now have Amitav Banerji as Head of the Political Section as well in...

MD: That's right.

PM: I suppose still at the time of Vancouver and in the late 1980s, the issue of South Africa really dominated Commonwealth affairs. Was that something in which Indian diplomacy and Rajiv Gandhi took a close interest?

MD: Very much actually. The whole level and extent of assistance to the Front Line countries in Africa was raised to a very high level by Rajiv Gandhi and he increased the resources made available to help them from something like 5-10 crore rupees to 100 crore rupees overnight. Subsequently he set up a fund for the development and he put the entire foreign service officers, quite senior, in charge of that. I think that the entire profile of assistance to the front line states, was transformed in Rajiv Gandhi's time and he was very enthusiastic about helping them. So that must have been reflected in any kind of strategy that he adopted and articulated in international forums they couldn't call 'Commonwealth'.

PM: And do you think the Commonwealth was of assistance in terms of India's relations with African states? Those Commonwealth networks?

MD: I think so, definitely I think they were of assistance and the Commonwealth has played a very important role in the dismantling of Apartheid. I remember that I attended the Independence of Namibia. Mandela had just been released a few months before that and he was not yet occupying a position. He came to Namibia to be present there and a group of leaders of about 15-20 called on him and I kind of shepherded the group as the Foreign Secretary. The delegation consisted of the top leaders of each different political party in India – extreme leftists to extreme rightists - and for all of them just his name was so important and this desire to have a glimpse of a person like that was so strong in the heart of these people that they all wanted to go there. I think that was a big moment. I was present when de Klerk made the statement transferring sovereignty to Namibia then and was

present there in the huge open stadium. It was quite a heady experience really and of course the Commonwealth is associated in this whole thing.

PM: And did you meet Mandela in Harare at the time of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting?

MD: No. But now I'm wondering... I attended one Congress meeting, but was that Harare of what? I don't remember it, but there was a one where our Prime Minister did not go.

PM: Right. I'd have to check. Just going back to where you started, and your exam question: it suggests that India's engagement with the Commonwealth has always been slightly tentative and uncertain. Do you think that's true? The fact that withdrawal was even contemplated in the mid-1950s?

MD: Well, I do not know whether it was all contemplated at the official level. I think so long as Nehru was there it would never be contemplated; but leaders from the opposition would speak about it, which they would be in any circumstance or any issue. In this country of diversity you have always opinion against it, but that particular moment when I took my exam, the negative factor had become very salient. I think perhaps, if I recall, the Suez War had become the reason for that.

PM: Yes, indeed.

MD: And that's why the very fact that they selected the subject for group discussion.

[Laughter].

MD: But I think India's tentative attitude towards the Commonwealth is partly due to a variety of factors. It's a question of priority that among the various institutional alternatives available. Do you devote more of your time and energy in terms of effectiveness? Now when it comes to, say, BRICS where these countries are developing... when it comes to SAARC, and then of course you know that the Non-Aligned Movement was very much there at that

time, and that was the main instrument for promoting our foreign policy at the time. So I think that because of these competing conditions... in relative terms we attached only so much importance to the Commonwealth, not more. This is how I would put it.

PM: Yes, and in terms of other alliances and relationships, how, for example, did Soviet diplomats view India's relationship with the Commonwealth? Did they suggest that it compromised your non-aligned status or...?

MD: No, the point of view of the Soviet diplomats took on India's policy [was] towards global issues. We did not allow them very much to influence our foreign policy.

PM: Of course, yes.

MD: They had a presence in Angola. They had a presence in Cuba, etc. and they had great respect for Castro. I remember that the Declaration of the Non Alliance summit in Havana, in 1979 - that was prepared by Cuba. We played, almost single handedly, the role of transforming it into something which served our interests directly rather than indulging in ideological politics. Paragraph by paragraph it changed, and I played a massive role in that. So that is the thing and I don't think that at that time the Soviets minded it because it didn't come in the way of the national interest. Nor did we become an ally or camp follower in these things that they were doing. So I don't think that they regarded the Commonwealth as another design or instrument of the imperial power to participate the world order, because they were very much in favour of the world order that they wanted. They also had views which didn't coincide with ours in many respects, so India, though there is the impression that non-alignment actually meant pro-Soviet; but to some extent there could be some issues on which our views converged and we took the position, but by and large it was really independent.

PM: Of course, yes. Just one final question. Again, thinking of it from the Indian perspective, you could suggest that the Commonwealth is really doomed because of a generational phenomenon, that you had the first wave of independence leaders – Nehru, and then later Nkrumah and Nyerere. Nehru, of course went to a British public school and felt very

comfortable in that milieu. African leaders had been educated in the British system and felt those links quite personally in a way that later generations didn't, of course. I suppose there's a view that that is bound to lead to a gradual loosening of that Commonwealth bond and perhaps its eventual disappearance. What do you feel about that?

MD: I think that how the continuation of the Commonwealth and it's becoming more vigorous and active would very much depend upon factors other than their common bonds that you very rightly pointed out. Secondly, I think that there should be a real desire on the part of the leadership of the UK to make it function.

PM: That's interesting.

MD: In my mind there is a question that, is the UK now much more interested in other institutions which have come up and which it is playing a part than in the Commonwealth?

PM: Indeed.

MD: I mean, the whole thing of EU and other institutions that have been set up.

PM: So the feeling that the UK has neglected the Commonwealth?

MD: That's right, and the kind of leadership that is in the UK, there should be a consensus in the political circles that this institution is playing a very important role. That this institution has unique features and contributions to make, and one should work together in this thing and give it the salience and attention that it deserves. That's very important, I think because the leadership for the last few years in the UK seems to me has given a preference to playing its role elsewhere more than in the Commonwealth. So I think, basically, the two or three areas that we identified. If some thinking is given to these and strategy devised, that could infuse new life into the whole thing.

PM: Yes, but essentially as a diplomatic resource rather than something connecting non-official organisation, you think? There are Commonwealth based organisations which are not part of the official

Commonwealth and I suppose there's a distinction to be made between the diplomatic network and the uses that could be made of that, and the kind of popular identification of the Commonwealth across Commonwealth countries, which seems at the moment to be quite weak and weakening further. If you talk to young people in Commonwealth countries, mostly they'll say "what is that?" or "it doesn't mean anything to us at all".

MD: I think that the latter, giving the Commonwealth a fraternity in functional and professional, non-governmental function, and the official arena is really the reflection of the former. The stronger the economy is the more dynamic it appears, the more active it appears, the more the professional and functional groups want to revolve around it. You have the same thing in SAARC. When SAARC was established we had numerous professional organisations trying to associate themselves with it; lawyers, chamber of commerce, etc., etc. Now it has faded out. SAARC is stagnating and one doesn't see much dynamism in that. Even if there are reasonable institutions tactically in the area, now because they've found none of them were functioning, one of the tasks was how to reduce them; but our problem here is basically the political differences and there the problem is something different.

PM: Thank you very much indeed. This has been a wonderful interview.