



University of London

## INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

### **VOICE FILE NAME: COHP (Kamalesh Sharma)**

Key:

**SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)**

KS: Kamalesh Sharma (Respondent)

**SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow speaking to Secretary General Kamalesh Sharma at Marlborough House on Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2016. Sir, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to take part in this oral history project. I wonder if you could begin please by commenting on your selection and election to the post of Secretary General in 2007.**

KS: I was elected by the Heads in Munyonyo in Kampala in their CHOGM Summit in 2007. There were three candidates to begin with. There was the Foreign Minister of Malta, there was Rais Yatim, the longstanding Cabinet Minister who later became the Foreign Minister of Malaysia and there was myself. By the time the elections came, the Minister from Malaysia opted out, so there were just the two of us. I was elected. It's a straw poll, all decisions of this nature are unanimous decisions of the Heads which means that the losing candidate withdraws and you have a unanimous decision then; and that's how it was. There are no numbers ever that were made available.

The background of my election has the following elements: in 1949 through the London Declaration the modern Commonwealth was really created by three Prime Ministers from South Asia. Prime Minister Nehru of India was the most prominent figure as an internationally recognised and prominent statesman. There were Liaquat Ali Khan, who was Prime Minister of Pakistan, and Prime Minister Senanayake of then Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Apart from this historical contribution of Asia, there is also the question of the weight

which Asia has in the Commonwealth. I think if you take India, Pakistan and Bangladesh together it's three-quarters of the population of the Commonwealth.

**SO: Sir, in 2007 was there a degree of regional rotation then in the selection of Secretary General?**

KS: I was coming to that. Asia had not offered a candidate until that point of time in the Commonwealth, and the Asian claim was recognised, I think, by everybody for the reasons that I have mentioned. That was very strong.

**SO: Sir, as I understand it, when Michael Frenco was considering putting forward his name to be considered as Secretary General, supported by his Prime Minister, India at that point had not considered putting forward a candidate.**

KS: Well, I think it's fair to say India put up a candidate reluctantly. India was very happy to contribute to Commonwealth in every way possible, but is happy to see it led by anybody else. The Indian Prime Minister at that point of time, Dr Manmohan Singh, was prevailed upon by the members of SAARC. The leaders of SAARC (the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) told him that what was considered as an opportunity for Asia should not be foregone and all of them said that they looked to India to put up a candidate. This explains why the Indian candidate came up quite late. It was after a lot of deliberation and some regional persuasion that the Indian Prime Minister decided that India will in fact field a candidate.

**SO: Sir, if I could ask you a little more about India's relative reluctance to take a prominent position within the Commonwealth, although you've said it wishes the Commonwealth to be led: why not take advantage of this opportunity of regional rotation, of the wider Indian world within the Commonwealth, and for India to be proactive in putting forward a candidate?**

KS: It has a lot to do with personality. I think the personality of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was very reserved on these matters and it could also be

linked with the fact that India in any case has sufficient prominence because of its size in the organisation without seeking it in any other form.

Well, that's how the events stacked up. It was not a formal rotation. There is no formal practice of rotation, but there was an expectation from the other members that a candidate should be put up from Asia, with some Asian countries themselves urging the Indian Prime Minister to do it and the Indian Prime Minister after consultations deciding to field me. This was partly because I'm a multilateralist and I suppose he thought that I'd be a reasonably safe pair of hands. I was India's permanent representative in Geneva and then four years in New York as well. And I was at the time High Commissioner in London for four years, and as such, a member of the Board of Governors and of the Commonwealth Foundation. I had experience of finance and trade from multilateral work in Geneva and New York and of nation building from East Timor. So I suppose the government thought that that was the name it would like to put forward.

**SO: In terms of your selection at the Kampala CHOGM: I understand that the South African President Thabo Mbeki - and the associated SADC vote - had originally been leaning towards Michael Frenco's candidacy. But there had been a discussion between Dr Manmohan Singh and Thabo Mbeki late at night which persuaded the South Africans to change their support.**

KS: No, I must in all honesty say that I'm not aware of this report or any personal discussions of this nature that the Prime Minister had. What I do know is that the Prime Minister was aware of the fact that it's the decision personally for the Heads and the Prime Minister as the Head must request the other Heads for support, and that's what he was doing. He did it to all the Heads as far as he possibly could and didn't particularly select anybody to do it to. He was in Munyonyo itself, and was quite active in this regard.

**SO: Sir, what was your vision and strategy as regards to the Commonwealth on coming into office?**

KS: A couple of hours after I was elected, I was dragged before the media to say something but the bulk of the media had been detained for security reasons.

Most of them were not there, it was just a handful of people. So it was a very short press conference, but they did ask me the same question as you did, and I said something to the effect that, 'As for the roadmap, it is best to devise it after you have been on the road and seen where you are on it. But as for the orientation, I want to make it clear that I'm certain about one thing: that as SG I will not allow the Commonwealth to be seen as a boutique organisation, and work for the Commonwealth as the great global good, which it is.' This phrase was unrehearsed, unprepared; it just came out from the heart, in what I said. That's how I looked at the Commonwealth. It is a great global good and I thought as SG it would be my task to advance it as a great global good. So, if you like, my vision was that the Commonwealth should not be a niche player in global affairs but a mainstream contributor to global action and wisdom. Part of the reason, I think, this can be done by the Commonwealth is its variety, its extraordinary diversity, and still its ability to create common ground. There are no voluntary organisations of this nature, barring the special case of the UN, which has as its members the biggest countries, the smallest ones, island and landlocked, post-industrial and developing and emerging ones, Europe, Americas, Caribbean, Pacific, Asia and Africa. We are a microcosm, a template of the world. If there's something which the Commonwealth thinks is an idea whose time has come, then it's a reasonable assumption that the time has come for that idea globally, because why would all of these countries that come from all over the world think something is important and it should not be important for all?

**SO: Sir, when you describe that very shortly after confirmation of your appointment as the next SG, you used the words 'dragged' to talk to the media. That implies that you were not expecting this early contact with the media. Does this suggest that you hadn't had time to develop and elaborate a coherent vision for your role as SG? You say that you wanted 'to see the road before you embarked upon the roadmap.' To what extent did you then not have sufficient time to prepare on coming to office, on suddenly being appointed, and appearing in front of the international media?**

**KS: No, I had certainly obviously thought about it, when my candidature was put forward, like everyone else. Like all other candidates, we'd have to start reflecting on what we wished to do. I had many ideas. By 'being on the road' I**

meant the way they should be given practical expression. But in Munyonyo I was a passive participant in as much as having visited as many countries as I could, spoken to as many governments as I could speak to, I was in the background awaiting the outcome of these elections. The thought that at some point of time I would have to appear before the media was a very remote one. And when I said 'dragged,' I said it facetiously, but it was a little literal because when Don McKinnon, my predecessor, saw me, he took me by the arm and said, 'Come on, come on, Kamalesh, now you're going to appear before the press.' And then in half a minute I was there. So you know...but that was fine. I think in many ways it was probably just as well that I didn't give a long-winded spiel about my vision and all that, but spoke from the heart.

**SO: Sir, how much was there a coordinated handover from Sir Don McKinnon to yourself when you became Secretary General in April 2008? Had you had the opportunity for extensive discussions with the out-going SG? Or was it a question of a changing of the guard and a sense that you would come in, this would be a new era and you would start to develop your own vision, your own structures, your own particular path for your position?**

KS: There was obviously some contact as it was a lucky feature that I was a High Commissioner, although not for long after that. Don was here and then I went home and then I met Don also when I arrived back here (in London). But in the meantime I had requested him for whatever documentation he felt would be useful for me to have, so this was sent to me in Delhi. The situation now is very different because it so happens that my successor is in London so there can be frequent exchanges and Patricia Scotland is able to speak to the future staff of her office, the three DSGs, and be briefed on particularly relevant issues.

And as for my own thoughts (before taking over), I knew some broad things which I would like to do. The first one was, how can global outcomes serve all human communities irrespective of size and endowment? This was not a new thought because I was closely involved in developing the extensive Indian programme of technical cooperation with developing countries in New Delhi. When I was the Indian Permanent Representative in Geneva, I was the

spokesperson for all developing countries in the Uruguay Round of trade talks. After when I was India's Permanent Representative in New York, I participated very closely in the Millennium Development Goals, which were supposed to serve everybody. I also chaired an initiative called 'Financing for Development,' to serve the developing needs of the needy members of the world community which led very pleasingly to the Monterrey Consensus. I was also quite active in the Small States Office of the Commonwealth in New York on what support bigger countries could give to this Office and to these States; and I urged India to increase its contribution significantly at that point of time. This was nothing to do with the (Kampala) CHOGM that was a decade away. I was UN Secretary General's first special representative to East Timor to create its public administration when it became independent. In principle, I just feel that big countries have an obligation of solidarity to help smaller countries trying to solve their national problems and challenges.

**SO: Sir, with this background of development, on coming to office here at Marlborough House you would have had to face the fact that the size of the funding available to the Secretariat and the development budget (of CFTC) is miniscule compared to the developmental budgets from multilateral agencies or individual governments. So how did you then reconcile extremely limited resources with, as you've identified, immediate and evident national need of the smaller members of the Commonwealth?**

KS: Now this is something on which I reflected on a great deal. I do a lot of reading out of interest on corporate management thinking and concepts, and some of them have a parallel. One concept with which I was taken up a lot is the co-creation of value. The co-creation of value concept was started by one Professor CK Prahalad from Michigan. He said in the new era of rapid change and globalisation corporations by themselves will be poorly served if they feel that they are in command of all the value which they need to create. They simply have to enlarge the catchment area from which they're getting the information and the intelligence of the way in which the world is headed. I thought that the Commonwealth could accept a way of looking at its future as co-creation of value. There were other concepts I reflected on, such as of core competence – also of Prahalad, Tipping Point of Malcolm Gladwell and

Competitive Identity of Simon Anholt. They all stress the strength of the idea rather than the strength of the budget.

**SO: In terms of acting as a think tank?**

KS: Yes, first, in terms of realising potential partnerships, and second in terms of digitalisation and creating a platform whereby various participants and actors, simply by the act of being able to connect and join each other, participate in this discourse in addressing common challenges, and are able to support each other coherently at national, regional and global levels towards the same goals.

**SO: So these are knowledge transfers?**

KS: Yes. I'll give you an example. It took a while but we created a cloud-based web platform called Commonwealth Connects. The point behind Commonwealth Connects was that we spare professional communities within the Commonwealth the technical and operational cost of running this platform, but they can freely log onto it and can use it. We absorb the cost, they grow the potential. That is one answer to your question as to how we can achieve significant outcomes from a small budget. I had some over-used taglines: 'One and One make Two in the ordinary world, but Eleven in the Cyberworld' – was one of them. The dormant nine kicked in only when you connected!

**SO: Indeed.**

KS: Another frequent tagline was, 'Don't be demoralised by your income, be uplifted by your outcome.' That is, you may be modestly funded and modestly staffed, but in releasing capability and potential through fresh ideas and initiatives, you're not modest. You have enormous ability to move things forward. I thought that one of the ways of releasing this potential would be to create this connectivity platform and also then focus on selected core areas where we have need and comparative strength. So we have created special hubs. The first one which we created is the CEN, the Commonwealth Electoral Network and this has been a huge success with Commonwealth Election Commissioners. This has a steering committee to guide its work. My

idea was to create a gold standard in quality of election management to which all our election commissioners can subscribe. Elections credible to the citizens of all member states has to be at the heart of a values-driven organisation serving its citizens.

**SO: I appreciate that is a network of individual national election commissions, but did you ever think of creating a Commonwealth Election Commissioner, with overall responsibility for this?**

KS: That really was not needed because, in the national context, the ultimate authority should rest with the Election Commissioner. The integrity of that office has to be paramount. But what happens at election time is that the Election Commission very often comes under tremendous pressure from those particularly in government, wanting to influence the outcome. So my thought was that these Commissioners should not be left on their own. The entire working of a democracy depends on their success. They should be able to say that when they talk about the voters list, or the level playing field for the opposition, or freedom of expression in media at election time, or deployment of security forces to ensure turnout, they are acting to safeguard Commonwealth norms. I called them the Commonwealth gold standard towards which we are all working. This gives a great deal of support and confidence to each individual Election Commissioner. There's a steering committee of the CEN that meets periodically and decides the collective work plan. They have regular meetings in different capitals every two years and they are connected on-line. Similarly we created a Commonwealth Health Hub, a Commonwealth Education Hub, and just now we've created the Commonwealth Climate Change Finance Access Hub at the Malta CHOGM to help small states develop capacity and get preferential access to climate finance. Regional experts are already deployed. So the comprehensive digitalisation of the Commonwealth, has helped bind it together. Another one of my silly lines is, 'Round the world, round the clock, that's our goal.'  
*[Laughs].*

**SO: Sir, what do you regard as having been the greatest challenges in your role as SG over the last eight years?**



KS: Two principal challenges: one very loosely, political, and the other economic. The real strength of the Commonwealth is as a values-based organisation. An SG at all times has to be thinking, 'How am I advancing the values template of this organisation?' Now we have a Charter which enshrines the vision that the Commonwealth has had, and draws together all its great goals. It's a very impressive land-mark document and it's a set of road signs for all of us, for the Secretariat, the wider Commonwealth family, and for the member states. The second action which I was minded to take was with the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, or CMAG, which has nine foreign ministers and acts on behalf of the Heads. I felt we needed to define more clearly where it is that core Commonwealth values had been transgressed, which called for action to be taken. The SG has political Good Offices and the SG advises CMAG from time to time where these Good Offices are deployed. The CMAG was constituted in response to the horrendous events in Nigeria in 1995. But its action was generally limited to responding to a military coup or an unconstitutional change of government. The member state would get suspended and the CMAG would then deal with the situation and place it on its formal agenda. But this had to move forward in a different way, because if you do only that, you are perceived as a censorious body rather than one whose purpose is there to assist the member states in advancing political values across a broader front. If there's a transgression there, you take note of it, but you also move beyond it into saying that these are our core values and we're ready to partner in remedying derogation from them. What we did over two years was, first, to get the Ministers to agree to ask the Heads that we needed to have core values which the CMAG will protect and advance, because these are not prescribed. In Port of Spain in 2009 the Heads agreed for CMAG to go ahead and develop what these core values could be. They asked the ministers to give the heads a set of goals. Over two years we worked on these goals and they were given for their approval to the Heads by CMAG in Perth in 2011, who approved them without change.

**SO: Was this part of, or separate from the EPG recommendations?**

KS: This was separate from the EPG because this was a stream which was started much before. The EPG was agreed upon at the Port of Spain CHOGM in November 2009, where the Heads also approved the recommendation for CMAG to develop core values to protect. The eventual identification of eight

goals was, as it were, a new Commonwealth value setting. Once we had these goals, it was possible for the Secretary General to say, 'Everyone knows these goals are there. The Heads themselves have identified these goals. Can we work on them through SG's Good Offices?'

**SO: So you said that from your perspective, the process was to get the Foreign Ministers to ask Heads for specified goals? So that they would have yardsticks, that they would have clear criteria? In what role did you place yourself? Were you the facilitator, or did you see yourself in fact as the driver, the person who would clear the ground with individual Heads to coordinate and collaborate - in other words, to prepare them beforehand?**

KS: Both the facilitator and the driver.

**SO: These are two different concepts: a facilitator, and a driver.**

KS: Well, the first step was to get the nine Foreign Ministers themselves to agree that the CMAG should take this step. We agreed that it would be very helpful in our work if we had clear goals. I advocated and pursued this direction. The second was that it was not sufficient for you to prescribe these goals: Heads must approve them because the political authority must come from the top. They had to agree to a vastly lifted degree of self-scrutiny. So what we did as a first step was to ask the Heads to authorise us to develop these goals, which they endorsed when developed. Political ownership of this approach by the Heads themselves was the key. I spoke to a large number individually at various times. I had to be both facilitator and driver.

**SO: Was there also a parallel process of your encouraging Heads that CMAG should be more transparent, that there should be more publication of its meetings, of its reports, of its finding? In other words, CMAG should have a greater degree of visibility, precisely to add to the element of sanction and guidance?**

KS: Clarity of intent is what happened in Port of Spain, in the discussions among the Heads when this item came up. They said, in effect, that this was the logic behind it: all of them wanted to advance these goals but had to be clear

among themselves which were the most important ones which CMAG should safeguard, though they are not exclusive. In respect of derogation from Commonwealth values, member states were entitled to know that the CMAG would take a particular interest in certain areas of these values. We worked together on these goals - it took a long time to do it - and represented them to the Heads and the Heads endorsed them. I think it was a great moment for the Commonwealth as a values driven organisation. Member states receive reports on CMAG meetings.

**SO: When you say 'we,' whom are you referring to?**

KS: Basically it had of course to be the Ministers on CMAG, but then the Secretary General collaboratively drove the whole process in close consultation with the chair of CMAG. These projects have to be a joint enterprise.

**SO: Sir, how did you see the role of CMAG fitting into your own responsibilities and policy space of Good Offices?**

KS: This was then clarified as the core goals were identified. There has to be daylight between the SG's Good Offices and what the CMAG is doing formally. But the Good Offices of the SG now had a specific focus approved by the member states themselves.

**SO: What do you mean by 'daylight?'**

KS: A member state does not desire to be taken cognisance of by CMAG, despite our hope that the CMAG should not be seen as a punitive body. The fact is that member states by and large do not wish to be seen on the CMAG but are content to work with SG's good offices.

**SO: No.**

KS: Hence the need for 'daylight' between the SG's Good Offices and the agenda of the CMAG. So the Good Offices of the SG are to tell a Member State that 'I perceive that some work needs to be done here and I am prepared to be your partner if you would wish me to be and then let us see progress.' CMAG

really would be drawn into the picture formally when the CMAG feels that it has to take an interest in the progress, or rather the lack of it. Till that point may be reached, I started the practice of briefing the CMAG in a tour d'horizon of our engagement and efforts. Not being on the CMAG agenda was an inducement for member states to be responsive to SG's Good Offices.

**SO: Sir, in this process of gathering intelligence and information about problems and compromised functions of the democratic process, then identification of private envoys to act in a discreet way, you describe it as offering your services and trying to encourage independent sovereign leaders to exploit the Commonwealth platform. Did you approach this with a template, with the idea of whom you would select, how much time you would allocate, then under a certain allocated amount of time if this was not making any progress, you would then take action or encourage this to go to CMAG, or for CMAG to consider it as part of its agenda?**

KS: The methodology varies depending upon the situation. Appointment of a Special Representative is with the consent of a member state. Not every country is ready to have an envoy because that becomes a public demonstration which they may not want. But if the SG and a member state agree that in situations it would be helpful and useful, an envoy is appointed. I had created envoys in some of the situations. Right now I have two. They're both in Africa. They're both doing very good work and I stay in regular touch with them concerning progress. The member states appreciate their work and CMAG is informed from time to time in the tour d'horizon about the progress that is being made. The focused mandate is very helpful because the core concerns are now clear to the Membership, the Secretariat as well as CMAG. This was a landmark achievement in the Commonwealth's collective support to the advancement of political values.

**SO: Sir, something which has very much roiled on during your two terms as Secretary General, on this question of the role of the Commonwealth as a values-based organisation to promote democracy and good governance, has been the issue of democracy in the Maldives. I'm obviously well aware of the election of President Nasheed, his**

**deposition in February 2012 and the subsequent political instability and uncertainly leading up to the controversial Presidential Elections in September and November of 2014. How far did you see the Maldives as a Commonwealth success story when you came to office? But then, how far were subsequent problems because the Commonwealth did not have sufficient resources to support the on-going process of building democracy in a former authoritarian political structure?**

KS: All Good Offices are by definition uphill assignments before the Secretary General, which requires a lot of patience and application. They're politically extremely sensitive. Had that not been the case, they'd be part of our technical cooperation programme.

With the Maldives, the Commonwealth have a very old history because there was in fact a special envoy from Malaysia, Musa Hitam, who spent several years in working with the President of the Maldives to enable the creation of a multi-party democracy from what in effect was a one-party state. Only the Commonwealth can draw such a deep breath and work steadily and in trust without fanfare towards a historic outcome.

**SO: Under President Gayoom?**

KS: Yes, with President Gayoom, in converting the Maldives into a multi-party democracy and working on the constitution to enable this. We've been very closely involved with the Maldives for many years and in building up their institutions, and strengthening the separation of powers which are needed there. These are all nascent institutions. It's a very young multi-party democracy and it has had a very turbulent time. They had a steady period under President Nasheed and then the circumstances in which he left was of very close concern to the CMAG. CMAG sent its own ministerial team to find out facts first hand. Then the way CMAG wanted to move forward was to help Maldives create a national commission of enquiry. Our effort was really to help things to be done nationally in finding a collective way forward from the crisis. When national elections were held, we observed these elections; the last elections were postponed, but we remained there all the time. We had Dr Lawrence Gonzi, former Prime Minister of Malta and Chair of the Commonwealth, leading the team in observing these elections and in

assisting with advice as well in the preservation of Commonwealth values as the SG's representative.

So the Secretariat has now a long history of partnering Maldives and the Government of the Maldives was generally happy to cooperate. The last time the Foreign Minister herself participated at the CMAG meeting. Rather interestingly, to show their good intent they asked - which is something very unusual - in quite a public way, in the presence of CMAG, that they would be happy to have a special envoy, to help them along. Our point with them is that there are two sides to what needs to be achieved. One is what you might loosely call the technical side, which is how is their legislature working: what are the rules of procedure and parliamentary practice; how is the executive working; features of the independence of judiciary and the inter-relationship between them, which we call the Latimer House Principles and which are at the heart of democratic polity. It happens in many of our member states which are newer democracies, that they have to work to find a healthy balance. But on the other side is the political challenge to have a level playing field for all the various political elements in the country. One of the eight priority values which the CMAG has is this level playing field and fair democratic space for the opposition. So we are working on both of these fronts. Going forward into the next election we hope that all the political participants will get a fair opportunity to contest free and fair elections. We are encouraging that these political processes should be initiated. We are encouraging the Government to talk to these parties. Right now many of their leaders are imprisoned.

**SO: Sir, I hear all these positive statements of trying to encourage the democratic process, but to what point though could you actually use leverage? Could you use the press, could you adopt a greater declaratory stance to try to embarrass, to try to encourage, to try to corral those who were resistant to building those strong independent institutions which you've identified as critical elements of democracy?**

KS: Well, right now we've had an Extraordinary Meeting on the Maldives, which is a very unusual happening in any case, last month, just for the Maldives in London. I don't know whether you've seen the two-page statement that was produced?

**SO: Yes, I have.**

KS: That really spells out pretty much what the expectations are. The next meeting of the CMAG is due end of next month, in between we hope to send Deputy Secretary General Ojiambo to visit and I'm in regular touch with the Government as to the progress which needs to be made.

**SO: Did you assign a Rapporteur from 2011 / 2012 during the time of political turmoil in the Maldives?**

KS: I had appointed my predecessor Don McKinnon as my Special Representative to help them along. After that I sent two other representatives: one of them was former Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi, who has prepared a report which was for Maldives and they've got it. They know what is expected of them to do under Commonwealth values. Now they've formally asked for another Special Representative to be appointed. From this we deduce that they're serious about making an advance and they want our help. But between now and the next meeting of the CMAG, the CMAG Ministers would obviously like to know what is the evidence of progress.

**SO: Of course they would.**

**Sir, another significant and highly public issue during your time as Secretary General, was the choice of Sri Lanka as the venue for the CHOGM in 2013. This was surely a spectacular own goal for an organisation presenting itself as a values-based association. Why was there not a more coordinated strategy to substitute alternative venues and to postpone Colombo as a venue for a heads meeting, given the recent brutal conclusion of a 30-year civil war in which there had been severe human rights abuses?**

KS: The general sentiment among the member states was to engage with Sri Lanka and keep on talking to them about the resolution of problems there, as is the Commonwealth approach. But I spoke to the President directly and told him that as Secretary General I was bound to advise him that I did not then believe that Colombo would be endorsed as the venue of the next CHOGM and this offer should be reconsidered. He accepted my advice and in

agreement I in fact wrote to all heads accordingly, conveying Sri Lanka's offer had been withdrawn. But by the time he reached Port of Spain the President had been persuaded internally to reinstate the offer. In the event my advice was borne out. The reason I gave to the Heads for the withdrawal of offer, agreed by the President, was in fact the need to rebuild and heal wounds after the bitter and catastrophic civil war. As Secretary General I did exercise the discretion I felt was available to me to dissuade the host nations, being in touch with other heads.

**SO: I am aware Sri Lanka had offered to host a Heads of Government meeting at Kampala; then Australia had stepped in at the Port of Spain meeting and said that it would host at Perth and so the possibility of Sri Lanka as a venue was postponed.**

KS: That did happen. The Heads, jointly in consultation, did not endorse Sri Lanka as the next venue but took the view that some more time should be given to Sri Lanka after their civil war to be in a better situation to host the CHOGM. That's how Sri Lanka stayed in the picture. The interest shown by Australia and Mauritius had arisen as a response to my letters to the heads.

**SO: Sir, in the era of Sir Sonny Ramphal and Chief Emeka Anyaoku as SG, the selection of a Heads meeting was not decided at previous CHOGM meetings. It was decided in the interim and there appears to have been a greater degree of flexibility of the choice of the venue because of the politicised nature of hosting such a summit. Surely that was within your remit to canvass Heads and given the particular circumstances under the Government of President Rajapaksa, to say it is not appropriate to host a Heads meeting in Sri Lanka now?**

KS: In Uganda, the offer by Sri Lanka to play host to CHOGM was only noted. So it was possible for me to urge rethinking by the President of Sri Lanka on its offer to hold the CHOGM. Once, however, the heads have decided upon a venue, the decision to change it is entirely in their hands. Their decision was to hold the CHOGM in Sri Lanka later and not take it away entirely from Sri Lanka. Not a single member of 54 suggested this was an option.



**SO: But you asked them if they would like to persist, or in essence if they would like to postpone?**

KS: I recommended to the President if he would like to consider withdrawing Sri Lanka's offer on account of the need for national reconstruction and healing, keeping open the possibility of reviving the offer when the situation had transformed, which he accepted.

**SO: So you handed over the question of the decision to the Sri Lanka Government, rather than exercising a greater degree of autonomy and canvassing other Heads? After all, Canada registered its opposition.**

KS: The views of many Heads were known to me through my conversations with them. That was the basis of my assessment and advice to the President of Sri Lanka. He found the advice correct. Thereafter, it is for the other Heads to decide what they wish to do and it was a unanimous decision in Port of Spain that Perth-Colombo-Mauritius was the sequence they would now follow in the light of developments and their consultations. What was on offer in Munyonyo in Uganda became a decision by the Heads concerning the offer by Sri Lanka in Port of Spain.

**SO: Sir, at the Perth CHOGM, though, the question of hosting the next CHOGM was certainly discussed among Heads. Surely, in that as Secretary General you are the choreographer of a Heads meeting, was there not the policy space to suggest that the time was still not yet right to host a meeting in Colombo?**

KS: In Port of Spain the firm decision was taken that these three meetings will be held. There was no provision for revisiting the decision. The situation was no longer open for consideration in Perth: it was a fixed decision of the Heads. There was not the slightest suggestion from any delegation at Perth that this decision by the Heads should be re-opened.

**SO: Did you not feel it might be appropriate for Heads to revisit that decision?**

KS: No. I've always felt that engagement with the member states must at all times be given preference and it was the preference of almost all the member states as well. In fact, no member state suggested to me, or to each other, that the decision should be revisited. There was no question asked about it by the member states themselves. There was no great ground swell that 'Let's have the meeting somewhere else.' In fact, almost all the member states kept telling the Secretary General, 'We have these challenges. Let's keep engaging on these challenges.' It is very important to remember that the positive developments which did take place took place because of this engagement - because I was engaged with the government at all times and all actors. I made five trips. If you look at my departure statements and the people I had met and what I had said, Commonwealth concerns are absolutely clear. In fact the Government which is now in power recognises this and they've indicated it in public; even when they were in the opposition, they knew that the SG repeatedly came and made the right points and met them too. In the final analysis, when the elections were due, it was because of this history and engagement that it was possible for me to go directly to the President and ask him, 'Well, you are the chair in office, which I have recognised. You have to recognise that I am the Secretary General of the Commonwealth and so I trust you will invite us to observe your election.' Our statements in public and the steps taken by us in observing the election were a turning point. We were the only observers.

**SO: Sir, in your determined engagement with states who - as you've identified - themselves had considerable problems in political, social and also presentational questions, were you actively encouraging Heads to attend the Colombo Heads of Government meeting saying, 'You must also engage?' David Cameron stood up in the House of Commons and said, 'I was right to engage. I was right to go to Colombo. I also used the opportunity to go to the north.' And yet there was a remarkable stay-away by Heads at the Sri Lanka meeting: the Indian Prime Minister did not attend, the Canadian Prime Minister certainly did not attend, but they were by no means alone. There was a much lower representation of Heads.**

KS: There was a lot of commentary at the Colombo CHOGM but people now do recognise that that was an episode in the history of the Commonwealth. It was true we had a somewhat lower representation.

**SO: Much lower, yes.**

KS: But it was the preferred way to maintain the decision which the Heads had taken. Once they have decided on the host, to go ahead with their decision. It was holding to that decision which enabled us actually to have that authority to talk to the government when the elections came, that the Commonwealth should be invited in order to observe those elections.

**SO: Sir, were there individual Heads who were actively encouraging you to continue to engage with the Rajapaksa government?**

KS: Yes. Most of them.

**SO: Who were they?**

KS: I used to meet Heads all the time - in London, New York, at regional summits, on bilateral tours - and they asked me what we were doing with Sri Lanka. I told them all the areas of engagement and reconciliation and what we were doing. The compendium we had prepared for them on the Chief Justice's dismissal on best Commonwealth practice and our work on reconciliation. We had a round table here in London to which we invited all the Commonwealth countries that had had great internal civic strife and how they overcame it. Sierra Leone, South Africa, Northern Ireland were there with others to share experience of reconciliation and to talk to them. Sri Lanka was very happy to learn of approaches and solutions that had worked. I spoke of my visit to the Northern Provinces and the Tamil issue; on our work with the civil society; on my independent meetings with the Human Rights Commission and with the national Human Rights Commissioner in trying to strengthen their work and advancing accountability. We went to the two media organisations and sent people to strengthen independent media. All of these activities were going on at the same time, trying to push Commonwealth values in the direction that was required. The Heads were encouraging of the effort.

**SO: Sir, I understand that logic of using the opportunity of a venue there to boost and to build those necessary institutions. But to what extent were you vulnerable to your host hijacking the meeting for their own agenda? In other words, once there is a decision on a venue, that then the degree of external Commonwealth control, the broader remit of a values based organisation, becomes to a degree subsumed within the national agenda of the host? This was certainly identified as happening at Perth in 2011; but it particularly happened in 2013.**

KS: CHOGM hosts legitimately bring their own imprint to Commonwealth summits. Indeed, this is desirable, of a celebration of the variety Commonwealth brings. In the case of Sri Lanka this was focussed particularly in the variety of venues for the youth, business and civil society events and the spectacular backdrops to the inaugural and main events in Colombo. As to the substance of the CHOGM, the hosts left it largely to me and my team to work with them, including my assisting the President at the leaders' Retreat. Very significant decisions were taken of innovative support to small states in the areas of trade, technical support and climate change finance. The youth and business events were very successful. The President accepted my advice to take regular press conferences, as is the practice. There was no discernible national agenda against a collective one.

The decision of the Heads was clear that persisting with engagement was the best way forward. It was a universal one. This was their decision despite all the difficulties. In the end, it paid dividends, as it created a position of influence for the Secretariat. Sometimes people did ask, 'Secretary General could have said this or that.' But I did. I publicly expressed deep disappointment more than once at the way the Chief Justice was dismissed more than once and advised the President to pause. In my public statements after my visits all areas requiring progress were clearly spelt out. But there's one big difference which we have to understand. Most of the other interested organisations, when they see developments challenging values, the question they ask themselves usually is, 'What is it that I can say?' The question which the Secretary General has to ask in respect of Commonwealth's principal values is 'What it is that I can *do*?' and what SG actually says is a part of what SG does. He has to make clear that the Commonwealth values are involved; that, yes, SG is concerned and pursuing them and this is what is happening.

But that at the same time SG is also engaged with the Government. The only way we can make progress is because we are engaged with member states, with the Government and all the other actors, in trying to push forward Commonwealth goals. Let me finish that argument. It was because of that engagement that it became possible for me to press the President that these elections which were announced must be observed by us. The Commonwealth were the only observers there. The President as Chair-In-Office had to accede to the request of the Secretary General. President Jagdeo of Guyana led the Commonwealth Observers at my request and the assignment was discussed by us. He gave a press conference after he met all the stakeholders. He expressed his concerns publicly, made it clear the elections were closely watched and needed to be free, fair and credible to the people. We introduced something which was pioneering in Sri Lanka elections, and these were domestic observers. In Sri Lanka they had never had domestic observers before, but it was the Commonwealth through the Election Commissioner that supported it and enabled it - which is why it is so important to strengthen the Election Commissioner through the Commonwealth Electoral Network we launched. And I must say that we were full of admiration for the Election Commissioner of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Deshapriya. He said in effect, 'Yes, I'm prepared to do this if you will support me,' and we supported him. ~~de-it~~. So what we ensured in the end because of our engagement and presence was an election in which ~~and~~ the people's historic vote was expressed. This was the Commonwealth in action.

**SO: Sir, how far do you think that the Commonwealth's diplomacy, the Commonwealth as a political actor embodied in yourself in your position as SG, has a greater leverage because of its private diplomacy? In other words, its below-the-radar activities, its discreet engagement, rather than a highly public declaratory stance, has a greater weight and influence?**

KS: I think that's quite well put by you. There is some price in the public perception to pay for this, but it's true that our strength is that we draw a very deep breath: that we go beyond simply stating public positions; that we engage our Member States in the direction in which our values have to move. And this creates what I think, in the end, the one factor so distinctive and vital for the Commonwealth, which is the trust between the Secretary General

and Secretariat, and the Member States, in its sensitive work. Some of it is away from the public gaze, but the outcome in most cases in the end is a happy one. We can see the work we are engaged in but it does not enter the public domain. In the work which I am currently doing in many countries - whether it's in the Pacific or Africa or Asia - I can see the same process at work. But the challenge before you always is, how to make your engagement and effort known to the Commonwealth family, to the outside observer, that you take these political values seriously, you engage on them, you're advancing them, but not in a way that it interrupts or disrupts or snaps the cooperative and positive relationship which is essential for you to advance those very values in member states. I had an exchange recently on this. It was a public panel discussion in Edinburgh and somebody mentioned a Commonwealth development about which there had been no critical public statement from the Secretariat. I explained that the tone of making an expression of concern is crucial. You make the Commonwealth concern known, but retain the comparative advantage is that your calls will be received and you can talk to and visit the leadership and talk of remedies. The Commonwealth USP is that it can be in a position to do something in certain given situations. Our concern must be made known, but this advantage must also be maintained. That's our asset. Not too many people have it. If we were to blow that asset, how will the Commonwealth be served and its values advanced? So one has to understand that there is a kind of division of labour, if you like. The fact that many other people are pointing out that derogation from our values was taking place is good because it helps set the agenda. I think this point was understood at the gathering.

**SO: Do you regard public criticism as a safety valve then?**

KS: It is more than that. Concern with values is a progressive feature of the contemporary world. The Commonwealth has to modulate it to its constructive purposes.

**SO: Instead, you are firmly of the approach 'I have to deal with all these people. I have to get them to talk to me?'**

KS: Yes, because of what is implicit in that approach. When I tell them, 'Can we talk about something?' implicit within it is the fact that there's obviously public

concern and it has been expressed. But we have to do something with that concern; the Heads are clear on our principal values whose violation cannot be ignored. We have to find a way of addressing the concern.

**SO: Sir, did you consciously use that weight of protest in the wider Commonwealth in your engagement in trying to continue to encourage Heads to improve?**

KS: When we talk to them we are telling them, 'There is derogation from our important values, that's why we are talking to you at all. Now can we please discuss why this is happening, what is happening, how this can be fixed and how we can help?' But I also started something new. I recognised the problem of what may loosely be called the information or sometimes ~~even~~ credibility gap. We cannot echo the expectations of human rights organisations or the liberal media on any development as they might wish. We are in a different position. The member states are shareholders of the organisation and our aim is to offer a helping hand rather than raise a wagging finger. But at the same time, it's necessary for us to make clear that we're not looking the other way, that we are cognisant that there has been this derogation, and we're engaged, we are working on it. So I started a new practice: something which didn't quite happen before. These were comprehensive departure statements. I used to go to a country, talk to the leaders and mostly even before I left my departure statement was out, which said why I was there, who I was talking to, what my concerns were, always couched in a constructive tone that I was there to make progress and looked forward to making progress in the directions indicated. The reasons I was there were made clear in this way. Commonwealth citizens within the country and outside in this way knew that while there were critical voices, the SG was there talking about the concerns and discussing remedies.

**SO: Sir, thank you very much for your time.**

KS: Thanks a lot. I appreciate your contribution to try and bring clarity.