



**Interview with the Hon Alexander Downer, Australian High Commissioner, Australia House, London, on Wednesday, 14th February 2018.**

Key:

**SO = Dr. Sue Onslow, Interviewer**

**AD = HE Hon Alexander Downer, Respondent**

**SO: Many thanks indeed for your kind agreement to be interviewed. What is your view of the value and viability of the modern Commonwealth?**

**AD:** The modern Commonwealth is a completely different proposition now, compared to the original small group of Dominions in 1931. At the time of the Declaration of London in 1949, apart from India, all other member countries had the King as their constitutional head. (Newfoundland was a separate country then; people forget that.) Those countries would have all had a great deal in common, and most of them still do. But when you add in St Kitts and Nevis, Tonga and other small states, it's just evident these countries have totally different perspectives.

**SO: That was something that Prime Minister John Howard stressed when I interviewed him. He felt that the Commonwealth had become unmanageably large, by the time he became Prime Minister and you became Australian Foreign Minister. Would you concur with that view?**

**AD:** Well, it depends what you want to achieve through the Commonwealth. But given that it's a free association of equals and operates on a consensus principle, it's very, very hard for all its members to find common ground. There's such diversity there. You have countries that have a huge issue for them, and that they're dealing with. By that I mean it's really important in the domestic politics of the country; so the President or the Prime Minister has to be talking about those issues. However, those could be issues of absolutely no interest to somebody from the other side of the world. For example, how interested in the Cyprus issue are the Caribbeans? Australia and the UK have some interest in it because we each have a big Cypriot diaspora. But Jamaica is not: how can you expect them to be interested in the Cyprus issue? You can't. And yet the President of Cyprus will want there to be some reference to the Cyprus issue in the communiqué.

As another example, Dominica is trying to rebuild itself coming out of the 2017 hurricane and Papa New Guinea is not going to be very interested in that. So, it's quite hard to find common ground, which is more than a banality, or is just facile. Of course we're worried about climate change: the last CHOGM was just before the Paris Climate Change Summit, so they all signed up to some language on pushing for agreement on climate change.

**SO: I'm aware also that the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon came to Malta, as did the French President (Francois Hollande). There was a considerable element of diplomatic 'caucusing' at Malta.**



AD: I think there would have been about 32 Heads of Government there, but 53 countries represented in total at the Malta summit. If you're lobbying for something, the Commonwealth heads meeting is a good meeting to go to.

**SO: When you became Foreign Minister in 1996, did you attach much importance to the Commonwealth yourself? Or did you see it fundamentally as an irrelevance in Australia's foreign relations, an inappropriate 'political imagination'?**

AD: I suppose I had an inherent sympathy for the Commonwealth, built into the DNA of Australians. They would think the Commonwealth is a good thing. Because I've often said to people, if the Australia government decided it would save a few million dollars and a few air fares and resign from the Commonwealth, the public would really take notice of that Australians would regard that as quite eccentric, and would feel sad about it. But the public image in Australia of the Commonwealth is that the UK, New Zealand, Canada. It would be a case of "India is that in it? Are there others in the Commonwealth? Oh yes, there are actually. Oh, well, let me think. What about Africa? Oh yeah, maybe South Africa." So they would think, "And the West Indies, are they in it? Maybe." People have an inherent sympathy for the Commonwealth, so the Australian government will inevitably go through the motions. But I don't suppose when I became the Foreign Minister I was sitting down thinking, the Commonwealth would be in my short list of immediate priorities. I didn't pick up the telephone and ring the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Chief Anyaoku.

**SO: Even though Australia had ensured that an Australian diplomat had acted as Director of International Affairs Division at the Secretariat since the 1980s?**

AD: No.

**SO: You became a member of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) during your time as Foreign Minister. What was your opinion of CMAG?**

AD: It was quite good, because it was quite a good group of people, it was chaired by the Botswanan Foreign Minister, Mompoti Meraphe, who was a very able guy. He was excellent. (He was a retired Lieutenant General.) And it included one or two countries which were pretty helpful. And so it looked at specific issues. Pakistan and guiding Pakistan back to democracy, was on its agenda. So CMAG would have meetings here in London with Pakistani political groups and discuss the issues with them. CMAG urge President Musharraf to take steps back towards democracy. Ditto with Fiji, when it had a coup. So CMAG suspended these places from the Councils of the Commonwealth; then we made visits to these countries and talked to them about their problems and talked to so-called 'civil society', which is code for unelected political activists.

**SO: You don't sound as if you approve of civil society, by describing them as an unelected activists.**

AD: Well, that's what they are. Some of them I approve of, and some I agree with; and some of them I don't. I'm more neutral about that. (In CMAG) we met twice a year. I found it quite good. It could indicate concern, put them on its formal agenda, and it was able to suspend countries. It became a verb: to 'CMAG' countries. The Commonwealth Secretariat was quite well run by Don McKinnon, who is a very competent guy. He had a sense of focus and priorities. CMAG



meetings were well organised. There would be a press conference at the end of the CMAG meeting with Don McKinnon there and the Chairman of CMAG and three or four other members of CMAG. It would get quite a lot of publicity: it would be on the TV news that night and so on. Very different from now, so does it have more teeth now? I have no idea.

**SO: One thing that Prime Minister John Howard was quite keen to underline was that he felt Zimbabwe was a failure of CMAG. He said his particular attention had been drawn to what was going on in Zimbabwe by Julie Bishop, who was one of the Commonwealth election observers in 2002. Following the election observers report, Zimbabwe was suspended and there was the creation of the Troika. And then of course Robert Mugabe made his personal, unilateral decision to pull Zimbabwe out of the Commonwealth in December of 2003.**

AD: I'm not sure Zimbabwe was a failure of the Commonwealth but I think it gave the Commonwealth a real focus. It was on CMAGs agendas, then it was referred to the CHOGM scheduled in 2001, but postponed to March 2002. And at the Cologan summit, it was agreed to set up the Troika. The problem with the Troika was that they didn't really agree with each other. In particular the South African President, President Mbeki wanted to go soft on Zimbabwe. But in any case, it was the exercise of trying to engage Mugabe and work out different ways of putting pressure on Zimbabwe. I won't say it was a failure, but it came to nothing because Mugabe pulled Zimbabwe eventually out of the Commonwealth altogether. Personally I think all of that was a period, when the Commonwealth had some relevance and some meaning - because all of CMAG's work. In terms of what's happened since, I think it's actually deteriorated quite substantially in recent years.

I think it really is very sad what has happened to the Commonwealth. It has no leadership. Then, you had Don McKinnon, you had CMAG which included good people. The high-water mark of the modern Commonwealth was the campaign against Apartheid in South Africa and the role the Commonwealth played in bringing about democracy to South Africa. The second phase was building on this commitment the Commonwealth had to democracy, human rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law. Given the commitment that the Commonwealth had to all of those things, it was quite effective in guiding places like Fiji and Pakistan back to democracy. The CMAG Chairman and I made a visit to Solomon Islands as well in 2003 when they had all their problems. So, frankly, I think this was quite a good and productive period for the Commonwealth. But what has happened since I think is very sad. I think it's just faded away.

I think it's an organisation now, which is focussed on 'Buggins turn' This is getting away from the core business of the Commonwealth, which is the human rights, democracy and the rule of law - starting to push for the development agenda and how you can incorporate the development agenda more into the work of the Commonwealth. And it has no money. The development programmes that it's had have largely been very poor. The governance has become pretty much gridlocked. The smaller the country the more recalcitrant they seem to be in the councils of the Commonwealth. It has to work on the basis of consensus because they're all sovereign countries, whether they're big or small.

**SO: You identified the first and most important issue for the erosion of effectiveness of the Commonwealth as being down to leadership?**

AD: Lack of leadership.



**SO: Would you attribute that to the political persona of the leadership? The role of the Secretary General?**

AD: All of these things.

**SO: What of the input from individual Commonwealth Heads? Or the lack of a core group driving a particular issue, as there was, say, over high-level poor country debt forgiveness (HIPC)?**

AD: You've just set it out very well. I don't know that I can add much to that. I've never been in favour of the debt forgiveness strategy, by the way. We went along with it (laughs) only because we had to, but it's not really a way of solving it. How did they get into debt in the first place? Shockingly bad decision making by governments that should be thrown out of office, but manage to survive by blaming others for their mistakes. I'm not really very sympathetic. In my own country we are very harsh on government that don't do well, as you are in this country. But apparently in developing countries, it's always someone else's fault. Actually, it's mainly their fault: the leaders and their bad decisions, not the public fault. And they often make decisions which are bad for the public and good for themselves, ie extractive leadership. HIPC went out of fashion anyway, and that's why it went out of fashion. People stopped supporting it.

In the past, the Commonwealth was effective. I'm putting in a good word for it! I used to enjoy CMAG. I had a lot of things to do as a Foreign Minister. Australia is a G20 country and being, as we said then, an Asia Pacific country, we had huge agendas. We had wars and terrorists, and then East Timor and turmoil in the Pacific and huge upheavals in the late 1990s in South East Asia with the collapse of dictatorship in Indonesia, and the emergence of democracy. We had huge issues to deal with, so why would I be too fussed about, and we had huge distances to cover if you're Australia, why would I be too fussed about the Commonwealth? Well, because it was quite effective, through the CMAG device, in pushing for the principles of governance, which are supposed to underpin the Commonwealth. But in more recent times it's not clear what it even does.

**SO: How far do you see the erosion of the Commonwealth's effectiveness as a product of a shift of narrative towards development, rather than democracy?**

AD: This is true for a lot of members of the Commonwealth, and so it's bifurcated more too. I suppose there was always the 'old' Commonwealth versus the 'new' Commonwealth - the developed countries versus the developing countries. Not that the developed countries think like that. But developing countries do, because you can blame someone else for your failings. As you probably know in life, it's a huge improvement on blaming yourself (laughs). So, blaming developed countries for their failings is *de rigeur*. So, I think a lot of countries really see the Commonwealth as just a way of getting some aid and assistance. One of the ironies of the Commonwealth is the huge demand on essentially three countries, Australia, Britain and Canada, the ABC countries, to provide more and more support; and those countries saying, 'This isn't a good vehicle for our aid programme. There are much better ways of distributing our aid than through the Commonwealth.'



I just found it good through that CMAG period, and then I Chaired the first ever Commonwealth Foreign Ministers' meeting in New York during the General Assembly. That must have been September 2002 because we were the Chair in Office. And that was a pretty lame meeting, (laughs) to say the least! I can barely remember anything about it.

It had been quite good to host a Heads of Government. We brought all these Heads of Government to Queensland, to the Sunshine Coast, which as it turned out at the time of the Coolum summit was incredibly badly named because it never, ever stopped raining! (Everything turned to mud and it was terrible!) But Heads of government came. The Queen came. And to Perth CHOGM, yes. Quite good to host a CHOGM and bring all these Heads of Government and have a bit of a global focus. The Prime Minister, I think John Howard quite enjoyed the Coolum CHOGM. And I think Julia Gillard enjoyed the one in Perth well enough, from what I hear. In Gillard's case, she and her Foreign Minister weren't exactly seeing eye-to-eye and there was this sort of explosion in that relationship during the CHOGM, apparently. It had nothing to do with CHOGM, of course.

**SO: How far do you feel the Commonwealth, as it now is constituted and with its lack of focus, is an irrelevant multi-lateral association?**

AD: Well, it's a weak multilateral organisation. It's not irrelevant, because it's relevant and we turn up to meetings and just about every Head of Government is coming to the London CHOGM, so let's see what they make of it. But it really needs strong leadership to give it direction and focus, and without strong leadership it atomizes, I suppose, is the right word to use. I gave you my example of Cyprus, for no particular reason, except I'm one of the world's experts on the topic of Cyprus. And I don't know what the Barbados issue might be, but they may have some issue and others in Tonga, or whatever it is, have their issues; and they all have to be in the communique, so the communique is pages and pages long. And the meeting just doesn't have any real coherence to it - just talking about all the problems of the world and all of the issues in the world and these countries fall into other groupings. This is an example of identity politics. I think identify politics is incredibly divisive and damaging to society. But the thing about identity politics is that in a way people are all corralled into their chosen identity, whatever it is.

So, in the case of the Commonwealth, they have other identities: for example, Caribbean countries, or Pacific Island Forum countries. Regional groupings have also become particularly important in the Commonwealth (There are only two EU countries now.) So it's those other groupings and that other sort of sense of identity, which is much more important to them than the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth, what is it that brings all these countries together, what do they have in common? They were part of the British Empire, but their shared history is becoming less and less important than other issues.

**SO: Do you see regionalism then as a corrosive factor in the Commonwealth?**

AD: Regional groups have other identities, so the Commonwealth doesn't have much of an identity. The only identity it has (and there are two exceptions to this) is that they were part of the British Empire. If you were talking to the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, she'll tell you that they all speak English. Well, the elites can speak English (and a lot of them are educated in British universities) but it doesn't mean they all do. The rule of law, bound together by the common law? That's stretching a point. The institutions of democracy? In a lot of these countries it varies widely: the beauty of having a presidential system is you can concentrate on



power in the hands of one person more easily than if you have to put up with parliaments and all that sort of things. Prime Ministers are very inconvenient if you really want to be hugely powerful (laughs). So they have parliaments, but some of them are functional, some of them are not very functional. So, my point is what they have in common is diminishing.

**SO: But what of the network of Commonwealth professional associations, for example, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Magistrates and Judges Association, Commonwealth Law Association, the Journalists Association or the Local Government Forum? These are professional networks, and knowledge fora and means to transfer best practice.**

AD: Take the Commonwealth Bar Association. Fifty years ago in the main, whether they were in Malaysia, Australia or Ghana, they all studied and trained in the Inner Temple, Middle Temple or Lincoln's Inn – ie the London Inns of Court. And now, that would be quite unusual. What I'm saying is, in a clumsy way, it's hard to work out what the Commonwealth really is, what its task is. And it's harder and harder to get good people signed up to it. A government will sign up to it because it gives them a bit of credibility, and soft power. Gambia has just come back into the Commonwealth because they wanted that degree of international recognition.

**SO: It's seen as a kite mark of respectability to smaller countries. And a feeling that they can benefit from the networks I've mentioned: in Zimbabwe's case, the Commonwealth can help to dilute an enduring sense of a potentially still toxic relationship between Harare and London. It eases the way for them to emulate others rather than feeling that they're in the dock of international opinion and censure.**

AD: Yeah, that's true. I'm wrestling with the defining role and purpose of the Commonwealth though. You can see it there, so it has effect, it has an existence. I go these Commonwealth meetings because I'm one of the Governors of the Commonwealth Secretariat. I'm on the Executive Committee of the Board of Governors as well, which meets four times a year, I was the Chairman of it at one stage. But, my gosh, you get to these meetings it's very hard to see what the big issue here is, and what we're trying to grapple with.

**SO: So it hasn't got a grand moral cause, no great crusade around which everybody can rally?**

AD: No. It had a cause, and they're all united in their opposition to white minority rule. South Africa was out of the Commonwealth and Rhodesia, I suppose. And it was the Lusaka CHOGM, where they did the deal on Rhodesia.

**SO: What do you see for the future of the Commonwealth going forward, then?**

AD: It could have a brilliant moment, borne out of the intervention of a talented individual helping to corral the Commonwealth together to address some issue, which they can largely rally around. But there's no sign of that happening at the moment. I think that's quite an optimistic thing to say about it, because we've seen this in the past and you mentioned it, rallying against Apartheid and introducing financial sanctions. The Commonwealth's leadership on financial sanctions against South Africa, which denied South African companies the capacity to roll over their loans, was incredibly effective. It was, I think the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union was obviously a critical factor as well in leading to the end of Apartheid, but it



was a big factor in ending Apartheid. So it could be that the Commonwealth could rally around some other issue at some time without me knowing what it is, but it would require a really strong Secretary General who was hugely experienced and able to sort of energise Heads of Government. So is that going to happen? Who knows? I just don't know.

**SO: Do you see it as potentially problematic for the Commonwealth that there is a Caribbean/British Secretary General and Britain's going to be the Chair-in-Office?**

AD: I don't think where SG Scotland comes from is neither here nor there. I don't think the fact that she's a woman, I don't think the fact that she's black, I don't think the fact that she's British or Caribbean or whatever she thinks she is. I don't think these are issues at all. I don't care about any of those things. There's only one thing I care about is, is she qualified to do the job. And 'qualified' doesn't mean any of the above. 'Qualified' means has the experience and capability and the discipline and the leadership to do the job. That's all that matters.

**SO: Sir, you were a proposed compromise candidate in the run up to the 2015 Malta summit**

AD: Look, not really. In that I was asked if I would be prepared to do that and I said 'Well, I don't really want to be the Secretary General of the Commonwealth. I'm preaching here about what the Secretary General should be like, but I'm not prepared to do it myself.' And so I was a bit reluctant and I wouldn't agree to have my name put forward. And so I said 'Well, by way of compromise, if in the end you can't agree on any of three candidates come back and see me. Come back and see me on the day.' It was supposed to be a straw poll, it's of course in effect it's an election. So that just never happened: they resolved it with one of the candidates - in this case Patricia Scotland - winning. So, no, I wasn't that interested in doing the job. And I do think, the weaker the Commonwealth gets the less, the harder it is to attract people of great calibre and experience. I know it's not really a great secret but we thought 'Well, could we get someone like Kofi Anan to be perhaps a non-Executive Secretary General?' And so he came over here, and I put together a lunch in my house with a few people. And we talked to him about it and said "We can get in a Chief Operating Officer and we'll all pay for the Chief Operating Officer. But you come in and you be the public face of the Commonwealth. That will give it prestige, because you have such stature; that will give it much greater moral authority and you just become involved when you want to become involved. And don't worry about the administration and the budgets." (It has been catastrophic. They have started to rectify it a bit now, but it's been a mess really. That's not really important in the history but we didn't want him to be involved in dealing with that. The Chief Operating Officer could do all of that.) But anyway he wouldn't do it. I can't remember we approached a few other people, and tried to get them to do it. But people didn't want to do it (laughs) - just like I'm telling you I didn't really want to do it either. (There's a nice house and it has some status). With strong leadership and the right issue it might be possible to remobilise the Commonwealth, because it's happened in the past.

**SO: How much do you think the visibility and the viability of the Commonwealth is also tied to Queen Elizabeth's ceremonial and symbolic leadership as the Head?**

AD: Well I think when people think of the Queen, they think so highly of her and so they like having her as the Head of the Commonwealth. As the head of Commonwealth she doesn't become involved in the day-to-day (laughs) management. So when the Queen leaves the throne, whatever the expression is, it's inevitable that King Charles will become Head of the Commonwealth.



**SO: You see that as an inevitability?**

AD: Who else is going to do that?

**SO: There have been debates about whether there should be an elected Head, whether it should rotate around the regions, or do away with the headship altogether.**

AD: I think that would probably be fatal. I think the Queen, or as it would be the King, is just completely neutral. And as for other former political figures, what authority do they have?

**SO: In your experience, did the invention of the Chair-in-office role cause problems, or any duplication of responsibilities with the SG, as the political representative of the Commonwealth?**

AD: Not a duplication. The Secretary General needs to keep in touch with the Chair in Office because the Chair in Office's a Head of Government. Ultimately like all multi-lateral institutions it's owned by its members, it's not owned by the Secretary General. And so the Chair in Office, working with the Secretary General, can work together very well. But the Chairing Officer doesn't do very much.

**SO: How important has it been for Australia to host the Commonwealth Games at the Gold Coast in April?**

AD: Popular, the Commonwealth Games is one of the things that the Commonwealth does that the public are really engaged with, at all ages. The audience is inter-generational. I can't speak for all Commonwealth countries, but I guess it doesn't have as much profile as it once did. The last Commonwealth Games were in Glasgow and I went. I thought it was great. It was really good. It was slightly cold and it was in August (laughs). So the Commonwealth Games were pretty popular last time; people watched them in Australia and some Australians go.

**SO: How about in your own work, Sir, as Australian High Commissioner? How valuable is the network of Commonwealth High Commissioners in post?**

AD: It's quite handy, but I'm not here to network with other Diplomats. I'm here to network with the British Government and British business and the arts, universities, so on, and the punters. I know the High Commissioners, because we go to Commonwealth things. And the Queen, being the Head of the Commonwealth, quite a lot of royal functions are organised for Commonwealth High Commissioners here. There's a Commonwealth Realms High Commissioners lunch coming up. So we know each other. I know them slightly, some of them I know well. I know the Indian High Commissioner and the Canadian and New Zealand High Commissioners very well. I obviously know many of the others much less well.

**SO: So, going forward then, do you think it likely the British Government will try to use the Commonwealth in some way, shape or form as a substitute for being a member of the European Union?**

AD: I don't think that's their plan at all. I can't help the fact that in this country you just want to continue to debate Brexit, but it's perfectly obvious that you should always have been using your





international networks. And if you weren't and you were just concentrating on the European Union, then you weren't conducting a very effective foreign policy. You should have been building on all of these networks to advance your own national interest, that's what you should have done, but you didn't. You actually did exactly the reverse. The Commonwealth is a completely different sort of organisation from the European Union and they're not comparable with each other. It doesn't make any sense. We went for 17 years without a British Foreign Secretary visiting Australia. 17 years. And there are more British born people living in Australia than in any other country in the world. And for 17 years the Foreign Office didn't think it was worth the Foreign Secretary going to Australia, and Australia is one of the founder members of the Commonwealth, and one of its pillars. So, there you are. That's pretty sloppy diplomacy on the part of the Foreign Office.

**SO: Sir, your father was here as High Commissioner until the autumn of 1972, which was in the run up to Britain signing the Treaty of Rome the following year. Did he notice a marked diminution in British attention towards the Commonwealth and a sharp shift to Europe at the time?**

AD: Yeah, it's collapsed. Depends when you say 'British' whether you include 'the punters'. The British people are almost separate from some of the liberal elites in Britain. They're almost a separate people; and, of course, there are many more of them than there are liberal elites. Amongst the ordinary people here in Britain, I don't think there has been any diminution in their enthusiasm for Australia, or for traditional Commonwealth countries. By this I mean the brother countries that Britain has, like Australia, Canada and New Zealand around the world. But the elites? Absolutely. The elites decided that, as Roy Jenkins famously said, "They had no time for kith and kin in politics". It was all 'Europe'. As for the Brexiteers and Remainers, they have all their own little arguments. But actually the truth is that Britain decided that it was going to become a European country, not a global country.

**SO: Rather than as you say adopting the French geo-political attitude of a multi-layered and multi-identity approach?**

AD: That's a fair point. I think it's quite a good comparison, the French. The Francophonie has actually been less effective than the Commonwealth, but it's probably drawing level now. I don't know who the Secretary General is there, but they've had big names as the Secretary General there, Boutros-Ghali, and the Canadian former Judge, Michaëlle Jean is very good. Having Boutros-Ghali running it was probably quite a coup, as former UN SG. Very smart guy, Boutros-Ghali.

**SO: To summarise, then, your view of the potential value and scope of the Commonwealth's future role, and its relevance: you see it as directly connected to leadership, moral authority, and a clear issue on which the disparate Commonwealth can unite.**

AD: Democracy, human rights and rule of law. So not all of those, not just democracy.

**SO: You also identified the additional obstacles as limited funding and an inherent resistance of leading members of the Commonwealth to put money towards this multi-lateral association because they don't think that it's an effective vehicle.**

AD: Poor value for money. With a poorly run Secretariat which is administratively inefficient.



**SO: That's quite a list of issues which would need to be fundamentally addressed if the Commonwealth is to be revitalised.**

AD: It's a chicken and egg situation. Canada has pulled out together of funding something called the CFTC. And we reduced our funding to CFTC by 30%. We discovered that the Commonwealth Secretariat had been using the CFTC funding as part of its core funding to keep the Secretariat going. So when all of this money was withdrawn it fell into a hole. And what do you do in a situation like that? When you're running a company and your sales drop off, you have to retrench some of the staff and you have to re-structure your costs. And they didn't do that. They have been doing that more recently and doing a much better job recently in addressing those issues. But it showed up when we did a review of the organisations we funded. DIFD did a similar study of the different organisations they funded, (published in late 2017) and the Commonwealth Secretariat came third last in their case.

**SO: Do you see then the distinct possibility of the Commonwealth being wound up in twenty years' time?**

AD: Not necessarily. Why would you wind it up? It doesn't cost much.

**SO: Can you see it just withering away?**

AD: It has withered in the time I've been involved in it. It has diminished a lot since I became Foreign Minister 22 years ago.

**SO: Then why not wind it up?**

AD: Well, it's a network, isn't it? It's quite a useful network for all of us really. It's an opportunity for small island developing states. It's more useful for them, I suppose.

**SO: In your experience, do the small states use it effectively?**

AD: Well, it's an opportunity for them to have their voices heard by the bigger countries, the Indias and the Britains and the Australias, South Africas, Canadas and so on. It's very hard for little countries in the Pacific, or in the Caribbean to have their voices heard in New York. But in the Commonwealth, it is easier and there are quite a lot of different meetings they can go to: Education Ministers, Health Ministers, Finance, and Law Ministers. Now the big countries may or may not send anybody very senior to those meetings, but they'll send someone. And so it is an opportunity that they otherwise wouldn't really have. So in that sense I think it is useful for them. I think if I was Samoa I would say to you, "It's quite a handy network for us. We're in the Pacific Island Forum and we're in the Commonwealth. And the Commonwealth is how we talk to people", and they talk to Australia and New Zealand the whole time. But it's how we talk to Canada and to India and to Britain, which might not really talk to them; we wouldn't have Embassies in Apia, which is the capital of Samoa. I think it's worth thinking about that. 32 members of the Commonwealth are small island states and although some of them might be Singapore, small island states have particular issues. I don't think anybody is planning to wind it up.



**SO:** So while the Commonwealth as a platform has no immediate utility for Australia, you recognise that it is a useful lobbying forum and information network for Small Island Developing States (SIDS)...

**AD:** We have those small island developing states on our doorstep, so they are quite a pre-occupation for our foreign policy dealing with the Pacific. So from Papua New Guinea to Solomon Islands to Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru, they are all Commonwealth countries. It makes sense for us to engage pretty heavily with all of them, which we do. And so if they're in the Commonwealth, that's just another forum where we see them.

**SO:** High Commissioner, thank you very much indeed. I'm very grateful for your time.

*[End of recording and transcript]*