



University of London

INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

NOTE: The respondent stipulates that, before 2018, researchers should seek permission from him before citing this interview in their work.

INTERVIEW WITH MR RAJA GOMEZ

SO: = Sue Onslow (interviewer)

RG: = Raja Gomez (respondent)

SO: This is Sue Onslow talking to Mr Raja Gomez on Friday, 22 March 2013. Mr Gomez, I wonder if you could begin by saying, please, how did you come to join the Commonwealth Secretariat and in what capacity?

RG: The Secretariat had just had a new division set up under Canadian auspices. Pierre Trudeau, the Prime Minister at the time, was very anxious that there should be in the Secretariat a division to promote management development throughout the Commonwealth's civil services. I was at the time heading the Civil Service College in Sri Lanka and I happened to pay a visit to the head of this new division. It was called the Commonwealth Programme for Applied Studies in Government - actually a Trudeau title given by the man himself. At the head was Cal Best, a Canadian who had been appointed a few months earlier and given the job of setting up the whole division. It was not going to be a large division, like most of the Secretariat's programmes. Part of the way into our conversation of an hour I was discreetly told that they were looking for an Assistant Director. I was also then told that he had also made an appointment for me to meet the Secretary General who was Arnold Smith, another Canadian, the first Secretary General of the institution. We had tea together - it was silver service and trimmings - and later Cal and I had a further chat. Cal had told me that if I knew any people who might be interested in the job would I pass on their details. I got the message and about six months later when the time for applying arose, I sent to him my own application.

By this time the Secretary General had changed and Sonny Ramphal had taken over. They'd obviously looked at a short list and the next thing I knew I was being told that Sonny Ramphal would be coming through Colombo and he'd like to have a chat with me in connection with the application. I can still remember, I met him in Room 903 of the Intercontinental Hotel in Colombo. At the end of it, he asked me 'When do you think you might be able to join us?', which was very nice, and in April '76 I joined them as the Assistant Director of the Commonwealth Programme for Applied Studies in Government. It was later converted into the Management Development Programme and later still I took over as its Director. But there was a gap period in between when I left the Division and joined the Commonwealth

Youth Programme as its Director. I was not a youth specialist but I was asked to take it on because of my working in training; they felt that the programme was a bit stuck in the dumps and they wanted something that worked the training element, which was a very strong element within the programme but had not really taken off.

To go back to the type of work that I was doing in the Programme for Applied Studies in Government: Cal and I had a completely blank sheet before us. We could do almost anything that we wanted as long as it was within the description of Applied Studies in Government.

SO: So as it was a new division, you were essentially setting up your own terms of reference?

RG: That's right. Yes indeed. Cal had clearly had some instructions or conversations with the Canadians before he came – that was of course his own country - and he had a good idea of general expectations. The Canadians were funding the whole programme in stages. They paid for the programme in its first stages. I think they promised money for four years.

SO: Do you know the size of the budget?

RG: Well, they paid for the Director, the Assistant Director and two other members of staff, our secretaries. That was all of the starting staff and later we had one other programme officer joining us. The project money was to come from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, to which of course the largest contributor was Canada; so it was a really understandable arrangement and one which worked very well. We found that we had to do some very basic stuff; for instance, we found that Commonwealth countries were not aware of what sort of training facilities were available in other Commonwealth countries in the field of management and especially the management of the Civil Service. I remember writing up with Cal a directory of training institutions within the Commonwealth that was one of our first printed efforts. People were a bit worried when they said they were going to do this, said 'Oh, this is old hat! Everyone knows about this.' We said 'You'd be surprised. People don't seem to know things exist. They don't know about it.' And when it came out we had to print it again and again and again because people simply wanted the kind of information they didn't have access to. The Commonwealth was not making use of what it had, which is really what the Commonwealth Secretariat is there for.

SO: Knowledge networks?

RG: Knowledge networks, yes. We went on with a number of projects like this and soon we had a whole range of activities going with funding from CFTC, but then I had an interesting break from my normal work in 1980 when Zimbabwe got its independence. We had pulled people together from various divisions to run the Commonwealth Election Observer Mission there and I was one of them. I ran the office in Midlands and following that when Independence Day came along and Robert Mugabe had taken over, I had an interesting call home from the Secretary General shortly after the Independence Day celebrations at the end of that day.

SO: Yes, so were you in Rufaro Stadium for the independence celebrations?

RG: No, no, I was in London at home.

The SG called me from there. By this time Cal Best had left and we had an Indian who had taken over: N P Sen of Hyderabad. He came from the Indian Institute of Management there. I was surprised first of all to get a call from the Secretary General at my home when I knew he was in Harare. But he said 'I've got a very interesting assignment for you. Zimbabwe needs diplomats; they've got to send in Ambassadors all around. Clearly they can't depend on the people they had who were very few anyway because all our external relationships in Southern Rhodesia had broken down and I want you to set up a training course for these people'. I had three questions, 'how far away are we, i.e. how many weeks preparation do we have? Where do we get the money from? And why me?'

SO: Those are very forthright questions.

RG: I was not a Foreign Office diplomat. I was a diplomat by rank in the Commonwealth Secretariat, but I was not a Foreign Office type. He said, 'I'll take your third question first. I want you to do it because you are a trainer. I can ask the political affairs boys to do it, but they would be a different kind of training. You will have to start from scratch and I think that's where we will rely on your training capacity. Of course you will draw on the Foreign Office people of various countries and the Political Affairs Division here, go ahead and speak to any of them as you want, saying you have my authority to do so, but I want you to take responsibility for the running of the programme.' Money: he said we had to find it and again 'I'll give you authority to talk to various countries and tell them what you're doing and ask them for that', and he added, 'you'll get it.'

My third question on the timeframe received the most challenging answer. He said they wanted the programme to start as early as possible, and he'd promised them 45 days. That was wonderful because it was one of the most interesting assignments I've ever had in my life and one of the jobs I've most enjoyed apart from directing Sri Lanka's Civil Service College which had given me plenty of opportunity for strategic thinking and actual delivery of lectures. I used to train much more than I was expected to do as the Director in place.

SO: In setting up this training programme for new Zimbabwean diplomats, you were obviously obliged to set up the actual structure of the course. Were you obliged to find the funding for it? And what was the extent of your international liaison? What were the networks that you drew on?

RG: This illustrates for me again the strength of Commonwealth networks. Fortunately because of the work I'd been doing with Cal, I had links to various Civil Service Colleges and some of the people. But I just had to take the phone and start talking to people. I was given names by High Commissioners, whom to contact, et cetera. For Canada one of the names I was given was that of Lewis Perinbam – I had been to CIDA and in the Foreign Office there at that time and one couldn't have thought of a better person to contact in Canada. He had an enormous network of connections and I was given names of people to contact. I was given the promise of funds by all those people.

SO: Mr Gomez, were you aware of the source of the political idea for training Zimbabwe diplomats? Was this a direct request from the new Zimbabwean leadership, obviously recognising that as a liberation movement they weren't trained diplomats? The Commonwealth Secretariat had provided the administrative backup for the ZANU and ZAPU delegations behind the Lancaster House negotiations in London. Or had the idea originated from within the Canadian Foreign Service? Do you know if the Canadian Foreign Minister at the time, Flora McDonald suggested it, or had Joe Clark, the Canadian Prime Minister suggested it?

RG: It could have been suggested to the Prime Minister of Zimbabwe by various people but as I had it from the Secretary General it was a request made to him by Robert Mugabe and he was passing it on. So we set about it, and got round to creating all the connections. I had seen the Commonwealth in action before in a way that I'd greatly admired in the way that the CFTC did its work. The CFTC had a great ability, the greatest ability I've ever seen to put an expert in place in a country at very, very short notice. So this challenge would be nothing new; the Commonwealth Secretariat was quite used to that kind of thing. Working fast, getting the people who are needed into place quickly. The Commonwealth at that time, and I hope now, had a capacity to respond to that kind of thing when the Secretariat had a request from a member government. And this was of course a very special case; I had huge amounts of goodwill on my side and we started the first course in a little short of 45 days.

SO: So how many people did you have assisting you? How big was the cohort you trained?

RG: We had, I think, on the first course about 12 or 15 would-be diplomats; not all of them would be going out, and not all of them would be High Commissioners or Ambassadors, but people who were to staff the place in other capacities as well. They had to know everything from the use of gathering newspaper clippings in a High Commission to the formalities of being a High Commissioner. So we had different people from different countries exchanging experiences individually and as panels and delivering advice and knowledge to these people in a way that they could absorb in a week or 10 days at a time. We ran, I think, a total of five courses over about two years and it was a great pleasure thereafter, being in my office in London to have various Zimbabwean diplomats whenever they passed through London dropping in on me. It was really lovely and that was one of the greatest adventures - I can't think of any other word for it - that I've ever had and one that I greatly enjoyed. In that effort, as I'd seen in the CFTC, I saw what the Commonwealth can do when it sets its mind to it, which other organisations, international organisations just cannot do. Not because they don't have the capacity or finance but because their size, their bureaucracies, and their methods of finding and utilising money are so very different.

SO: So it was a question of the degree of flexibility and autonomy which comes with smaller organisations, but then which have extraordinary networks of expertise?

RG: That's a good summary. The smaller organisation has to depend on building up good networks and if those networks crash, or if they fail, or if they become untrustworthy, then they just have no hope of coming up with the same standards as the larger ones.

SO: This is a fascinating infusion of good business practice, astute diplomacy and most cost-efficient use of resources?

RG: Absolutely. The Commonwealth Secretariat at the time I was there, and I hope now again, was exceedingly effective in its use of resources. Salaries weren't high. But in all ways it was very resource efficient and it was an absolute delight to work in that kind of context. Again the co-operation between and among divisions was very great. I could go to the Education Programme and ask them 'Look, you must have had this sort of experience before. I'm coming across it for the first time in the Civil Service Colleges. What would you suggest I do in this kind of thing?' And I would have a whole range of experiences from across the Commonwealth being laid in front of me.

SO: There was considerable political investment across the international community for Zimbabwe to work as a multi-racial society, and a modified capitalist political economy, so that it could offer a role-model for apartheid South Africa in terms of transition. Were you aware of this weight of expectation behind your work? Or were you looking at this in an isolated context, that what you're doing in Zimbabwe wasn't going to be replicated elsewhere?

RG: I think it was a bit of both. Zimbabwe was a very special case but we were well aware that whatever we did in Zimbabwe would be looked upon very carefully by others. They might want to imitate it or to examine any deficiencies. But again we didn't feel threatened by that kind of thinking because it was a challenge, but in no way did we feel that we were being held back because of the threat of possible failure or something like that. No, we didn't think in terms of failure.

SO: Do you know if this kind of model was in any way rolled out for the ANC, providing training for future diplomats in the South African transition?

RG: I don't think they did the same kind of thing and perhaps the same kind of effort wasn't necessary.

SO: I appreciate the Department of Foreign Affairs in South Africa had the greater weight of experience and representation. After all, South Africa did not have the total pariah status of Rhodesia between 1965-1980.

RG: Yes, and they had been getting ready for participating in Commonwealth work et cetera for a long time. I remember attending a talk given by the last Ambassador of South Africa before they rejoined the Commonwealth. He was asked a question from the floor about what sort of international links South Africa would look to and what would be the importance of the Commonwealth in them. I think this was a talk at the RCS. His answer stuck in my head. He said, 'I'm perfectly sure that the new government will want to make contacts with the Commonwealth very, very early'; as we know it was one of the first contacts that they made. He added, 'the Commonwealth will be able to give

them a network of countries to work with which no other international organisation would be able to do. The European Union and the United Nations will give assistance of different sorts but for sheer networking capacity, I would fancy they would rely on the Commonwealth in the first instance', which is exactly what they did.

SO: Oliver Tambo described it to Sonny Ramphal that it was the government of South Africa which had left the Commonwealth in 1961, it was not the people of South Africa - implying an idealistic, moral attachment from South African civil society. But here you're outlining the practical politics and benefits which would accrue to South Africa being back within this well-placed organisation?

RG: That's correct.

SO: After your particularly exciting assignment down in Zimbabwe, how did your job evolve?

RG: My job evolved in a way that I didn't anticipate. Mr Sen left us and the post wasn't advertised. That was a pretty clear indication that the Assistant Director was going to be promoted. I went off on home leave at that time and when I came back I was told that I was not taking over as the Director. The post was going to a diplomat in London who was coming to the end of his term here.

SO: Is that when there's a spectacular gap in the listings of senior staff?

RG: Is there?

SO: I'm very struck because just looking at this list of CommSec senior staff. I was sent this by Hilary McEwan in the library. Here we have Cal Best, N P Sen and after 1981 there appears to be a gap.

RG: No, there was no gap. That part of the gap was filled by me. What happened was that 'Inoke Faletau of Tonga, who was the Dean of the Commonwealth side of the Diplomatic Corps, found his term was ending but he wished for personal reasons to remain in London for some further time and this was looked upon as a job to which he could step in. I lost out on that opportunity.

SO: Oh dear.

RG: Of course I was disappointed but arrangements were made for me after a few months to become a Director of another division though I had not worked specifically in that area - and that was the post of Director of the Commonwealth Youth Programme. Much of its work was in training and in that sense it was right in my field of interest and skill. I was asked to boost its training programmes. We did well and in fact it was during my time that we were given an award by the UN for our work in youth development.

SO: From 1984 you were in CYP.

RG: That's right, yes. I took over as the Director of Commonwealth Youth Programme in 1984 and then somewhere in '85 or '86 'Inoke left the Secretariat.

SO: So there was a space for you?

RG: There was a space for me again and this time I was asked about it. I was asked by Moni Malhoutra who was going to be Assistant Secretary General in charge of both divisions as it happened; whether I would like to come back to what was now called the Management Development Division. And I said there was nothing I'd like better, but I said it would be awfully disloyal of me to leave the CYP at that stage. It would be the wrong thing to do; it would give wrong messages to people. I remember his answer to me was 'I was hoping you'd say that.' So I remained on as Director of the Commonwealth Youth Programme until I finished my work with the Secretariat in 1992. But for a short period in between, I think it was '85 to '87, I did hold that post until Mohan Kaul was selected for the post. Moni Malhoutra chaired that board. I was one of the members. I think another member of the board was Vince Cable - I remember serving with Vince on a board or two. So yes, I held both Directorates concurrently for a period.

SO: So were the Canadians still the prime funders of Applied Studies?

RG: No, that period had passed and we were then funded for salaries from the Secretariat and for project work as earlier from CFTC funds. We had to make out a case for each project. It all was very small by international standards; we used to go through what could sometimes be a daunting budget process; we used to have to defend our budgets before all the Directors who were pushing for their own funds at the same time.

SO: That sounds a gladiatorial process.

RG: Oh yes! All Directors could ask questions about what was going on. You had to have your strategy and your thinking quite sharp and be able to answer all sorts of questions. You could find for instance a Director from, say, the Science Council asking some questions of the type that you would not have thought of, but it was a good process.

SO: So internal peer review, as it were?

RG: Very much an internal peer review.

SO: But was there also a battle over allocation of funds?

RG: Oh yes, yes, but it never became a squabble. I'm sure we had some disagreements. But as long as we had good projects it was usually possible to get funds for the year's work.

SO: So in terms of the project focus approach, and geographical coverage, where were your energies directed under the CYP?

RG: Ah, that was a completely different ballgame. The CYP was very different from all the other divisions; it had its own memorandum of understanding; it had its own non-Secretariat budget. We had to find the money ourselves from member countries. Countries made direct pledges to the CYP as they did to the CFTC and to the Secretariat. For country and inter-country project work, there were scholarships and so on for people of one country to go to another.

But the CYP had to collect its own money from the countries and it was not an assessment as with the CFTC where it was worked out in percentages, but it was what they were all willing and able to pledge at a given time.

SO: So how much of your energies were on fundraising?

RG: Quite a lot, that was a very difficult part of the CYP work and I was able to persuade them that they should stick to certain levels of funding. They weren't willing to say they would contribute so much in percentage terms but I was able to work out with them during my eight years there that they would certainly not go below - these were all informal agreements - they would certainly not go below the levels which could lead to the break up of on going programmes. The greatest problem for me was that each country pledged its funds not in sterling but in their own currencies, and that was very difficult.

SO: That's impossible to budget if you've got such wide currency variation.

RG: Yes, currency variations could make the sterling budget that much smaller - and I had to work in terms of sterling of course.

The CYP was also very different in that it had four regional centres. It was the only Commonwealth agency at the time which had units outside of London and I had them in Fiji for the Pacific area, in India for Asia, in Guyana for the Caribbean and in Zambia for Africa. And some of them were pretty difficult places to work in because they had their exchange problems and so on. Guyana and Zambia for instance are pretty good examples. I devoted huge amounts of time negotiating with staff on salaries, I remember being in Zambia at a time when one of the staff took me out and showed me the cost of cooking oil; it's a huge thing in Zambia --

SO: You would have been there during the Structure Adjustment era when, as you say, the Zambian economy went through such a dramatic contraction of incomes against spiralling costs?

RG: Yes, That's right. Well, this man said, 'Sir, I'll show you something. Just come with me.' And he took me out. I used to live in our Youth Centre whenever I went to Zambia; it was a nice little place with good accommodation and a cafeteria - he took me to a shop outside and he showed me the cost of cooking oil that morning after breakfast. Then he said 'Will you come back with me later and have another look?' And exactly as he said; the price had gone up. It was a day-to-day change and handling staff in those circumstances was very difficult for the Regional Director. I remember once having to get on a plane and go to Zambia at three hours notice because of problems on site. I had just come for a normal day in the office; I knew there were problems in Zambia, but it was still a normal day in the office and then we got this call saying things were deteriorating there, even possible violence and so on. Moni and I had a discussion, he went to the Secretary General and he came back and said 'You've got to be on a night flight, it's the only way to show them that we are thinking of them and working things out for them.' I phoned my wife and said 'Can you put some clothes together for me?', the travel people got the ticket for me and I left home at 6 o'clock to take the night flight to Zambia. We were within the university campus, so any civil disturbances outside easily spread to our people, and our people were

not in a good frame of mind then. The story of the cooking oil illustrates the difficulties people had in simply maintaining their families at that time.

SO: Yes, absolutely. If you were based in Zambia on the university campus, what was the principal focus of CYP activity there?

RG: Each of our centres used to run a major training course in Youth and Development with a Diploma issued at the end of it. Some of the Diplomas we co-ordinated with neighbouring universities and I think in Zambia, unless my memory fails me, it was issued under the auspices of the CYP as well as of the University of Zambia. We tried to work out, and I think we succeeded finally, in doing a similar thing with the University of Punjab in India where we were based in Chandigarh, neighbouring the University.

SO: And you did it with the University of South Pacific in Fiji?

RG: With the University of the South Pacific in Fiji too. Guyana was a different matter, Guyana was almost divorced from the rest of the Caribbean and the Commonwealth at that time because of their own problems. But the Guyana people were exceedingly helpful to us in maintaining our office and people there. But the point I'm making is that in all these countries, except perhaps India, had all sorts of problems with exchange, culminating in such situations as the kind of problem that finally erupted in Fiji and so on. One of the most demanding things for me – if that's the word - was being woken up at any hour of the night, as you can see from the time zones in these different places and telephone systems being what they were at that time.

SO: Constant telephone calls too.

RG: Yes they had to phone me whenever they could get through on the line.

SO: So was the CYP in Fiji caught up in the double coup in 1987?

RG: Yes and then again in Fiji and I think in problems in the Solomon Islands, but those were after my time.

SO: So they would be particularly vulnerable but susceptible to student activism, and its repression by the authorities?

RG: True enough. There was another sort of problem I once had to face in Fiji and again it was a call in the middle of the night from a neighbour of one of my staff. I had selected this member of staff, who was gay, but I selected him because of his good reputation for youth work. Various people were taking objection to his being on our staff and so close to the campus and so on at the university. Remember this was 20 odd years ago.

SO: I lived in Fiji in the late 70s, but I don't remember that sort of homophobia and stigmatisation.

RG: I don't know that my colleague had given any cause for concern or anything like that, but you know, but it might have been a worry – especially in the context of that time involving children and so on and so forth. But I explained to the person concerned that, I said we will not have interference in the selection simply on the basis that the man was gay --

SO: Absolutely. Sexual preference is not an issue.

RG: And that this is something that would have to be sorted out locally. I said I would speak to my regional Director on the ground there and tell him about it, that he had expressed concerns and that he would call on him and keep in touch with him – I'm happy to say that that was the end of that matter.

SO: Mr Gomez, was the CYP's programme of Diploma of Youth and Development run in conjunction with local tertiary education, or was it affiliated in any way with the emergence of the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver?

RG: Not really, no. That was a completely separate entity and again with the Commonwealth of Learning, I think the same name that I mentioned earlier came up: Lewis Perinbam. I think he had some role in setting up the Commonwealth of Learning. I'm not sure whether he took up a post within it, as Chancellor or Vice-Chancellor but he was again a moving force in the Commonwealth of Learning.

SO: So at this particular point then, did you have the status of a Division of Youth Affairs?

RG: Yes, it was in fact more than a Division; it was a semi-autonomous Division of the Secretariat, because I was not dependent for funds on the Secretariat. There was a Memorandum of Understanding, which made me responsible to the Secretary General, as any other Division would be, for its governance.

SO: And how much institutional importance was attached to your Division, because I do know that the Human Rights Unit was not given the status of a Division?

RG: The Divisions that I've been involved with were not, in broad Secretariat terms, institutionally important in terms of the primary Commonwealth concerns of the time. If you look at it, the Secretariat really has two important areas where the focus is permanently on – political affairs and economic affairs. You could say that a third one was the CFTC at the time that I was there because of the project work that they would coordinate and fund. Most of the other Divisions were of less importance but again something of great encouragement to me working with the Secretariat was that, while we weren't regularly going in and coming out of the Secretary General's office, as the Director of these two Divisions or the head of the CFTC would be doing, Sonny Ramphal certainly knew what was happening.

He was also absolutely astute, and had a quality which I have hardly seen in anyone else, in knowing about the interests of all of his staff and he would keep in touch with them as necessary. I remember my very first extension of post - I had come on a two-year contract in the first instance and having served for the two years, I would have been very happy to serve for another three. Three years was the standard contract length after the first 2 years which were on a kind of probationary basis. And the way that extension was offered to me gave me a great insight into how Sonny Ramphal handled his staff. He met me at some social occasion (someone's departure or some party in the Secretariat) and he took me aside and he said 'Raja, do you think

you could stay with us for another three years?' The way that he put it to me was as if I was doing him the greatest favour on earth.

SO: Quite the politician?

RG: He knew exactly how to handle people. As you said, quite the politician, yes certainly, the consummate politician, but it was a bit more than that. He was keeping in touch with all our interests and our problems and so on as human beings.

SO: Astute man management?

RG: Astute man management as well, keeping sight of things. He was very, very good at that and he knew what all his senior staff were doing.

SO: While you were Director of the Commonwealth Youth Programme you were also Chair of the Human Resources Development Group in '78?

RG: Yes - the Human Resources Group consisted of all the groups that worked with Moni Malhoutra at the time, which happened to be able to be described as a Human Resource Development Group. Then I think there were six Divisions all together: Education then under Peter Williams; Health under Kihumbu Thairu of Kenya; Women and Gender under Dorian Wilson-Smillie; José Furtado was in charge of the Science Council which again, had a certain autonomy but not to the same extent as the CYP. The sixth was Education and Training under Peter Snelson.

We took turns chairing HRDG for six months each, so we used to just switch Chairs around and so I ended up as Chair of it for a brief period. We had an excellent Secretary, Steve Packer, who served HRDG in addition to his own work as a Chief Project Officer in his parent division.

SO: So what institutional or administrative oversight did Moni Malhoutra have for this particular group?

RG: Do you know Moni? If you know Moni then you would know that his administrative oversight is absolutely total, 100%. But I think he used to find it very difficult to delegate.

SO: His style was micro management?

RG: Micro management, yes. He was a micro manager; it was very difficult for the Directors particularly as he had a remarkable brain. He could take in huge amounts of data, he was an absolutely brilliant man, no waffling with him; if you were saying something doubtful, he would just cut through it like a knife through butter.

SO: But he could be quite abrasive?

RG: He should have been a Deputy Secretary General but I think some of those personal qualities worked against him. There was a lot of canvassing that went on against him. One of the people who knew how to handle Moni was Sonny Ramphal; he got the best out of Moni.

SO: Moni had been his particular recruit from Mrs Gandhi's office, so I think he was part of Sonny's inner 'kitchen cabinet'.

RG: Yes, he came in as one of two Assistant Directors in the SG's Office – well there were two people at Assistant Director Level who were called Special Advisers. I remember it was Moni who fixed up my appointment in Colombo to meet Sonny Ramphal. At the time he was still an Assistant Director. But Sonny then appointed him to be Director of the SG's Office and later he became Director of Political Affairs and finally went up as Assistant Secretary General.

SO: You say that for part of your stint at the Secretariat you were both in charge of the CYP and also the Applied Studies Programme between '85 to '87.

RG: Something like '85 to '87, I must check that but it was somewhere in that period for about one and a half years I was both, maybe a bit less than one and a half years. I continued in the CYP for 8 years from '84 to '92.

SO: What was your particular viewpoint then of transition from Sonny Ramphal as Secretary General to Chief Emeka?

RG: With Sonny Ramphal going I think various countries thought it was time to start reducing the power of the Secretariat. Sonny had become a very important player on the international stage - so important that they ensured that he didn't become UN Secretary General! He would have been far too activist for most countries as the UN Secretary General.

SO: You've got to keep it 'comfortable'?

RG: Yes. And I think that feeling was also shared by some of the Commonwealth countries, as far as I'm concerned for entirely the wrong reasons.

SO: Were you aware which particular Commonwealth countries would have been antagonistic to the idea of him becoming UN Secretary General? I just wondered if that sense percolated through the Secretariat.

RG: I think a lot of us in the Secretariat were pretty sure that he wouldn't get the job.

SO: I do know by the end of his term as Secretary General that the relationship to Marlborough House and the British Government had become extremely fractious.

RG: Yes and I think a country that had been very concerned about his becoming UN Secretary General had been the United States, and they would have leaned very heavily on the UK. And they would have known that the relationship was taking a fractious turn and they would have made use of that I'm sure. So this country could have been one of them, but it's not one of those things that I could say I have looked into and could put my finger on to the extent that I could name countries. But certainly from that point on, not just Sonny but I think various countries had decided that the Commonwealth should not be as strong as it was under him. And one way of doing that was to reduce the money and the pressure on the CFTC that started building up

from that point on. Chief Emeka clearly had to agree to all sorts of cuts and various devices to keep the place going.

SO: So a real restructuring?

RG: Oh yes, but from that point onwards, as far as I'm concerned the Secretariat has been on a downward path financially and that usually has consequences overall. The glory days were gone and also such things that had helped Sonny to maintain the Secretariat at the prominent level that it had attained internationally no longer existed: I mean the two Southern African problems, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

SO: These gave him moral energy and purpose?

RG: Oh yes, and they were great focal points for Commonwealth energies and that no one could complain about. We've not had anything of that sort since.

SO: No convenient opponents?

RG: Yes. Well, I suppose Fiji would have been one of them, but if you look at the scene since then there's been nothing of that sort in which the Secretariat could make its name. Don McKinnon sorted out things between Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and so on and so forth from there. With all respect to those countries they were really very small regional or sub-regional problems, not the planet-engaging interests that we associate with Zimbabwe and South Africa. So the Secretaries General have not had that same amount of opportunity either, in fairness to them. CMAG, for instance, I think is a case in point. CMAG was set up to ensure that Commonwealth countries follow Commonwealth values, or observe Commonwealth values, but what are those values? CMAG, as far I know, has only been able to be effective when a country has done something which required it to leave the Commonwealth, like having Guyana coming in for another coup or something; or Fiji or Pakistan and so on. But hardly anything else.

SO: So despite the 2003 Latimer House Principles, the Commonwealth is still a collaborative and not a coercive organisation? Despite CMAG, it doesn't have political leverage as it isn't able to exert restrictions in quite the same way as perhaps the United Nations? It can't use economic or diplomatic sanctions.

RG: Certain countries in the Commonwealth can use economic and diplomatic sanctions for various reasons.

SO: Individual countries, yes, but I was thinking as an organisation as a whole?

RG: As an organisation as a whole and in any way using them would be contrary to another Commonwealth principle that is observed, I mean the principle of consensus. When you speak about consensus you are talking about getting things done, pushing the positives rather than suppressing the negatives. The current Sri Lanka situation and the hosting of CHOGM, I think is a case in point where, as I was speaking to you earlier, I would like to see the positives being pushed rather than possible negatives being spoken about to the extent that they are.

- SO: Just going back to points of transition between SGs: what was your personal viewpoint of the transition from Sonny Ramphal's tenure as Secretary General to Emeka? How swiftly did new organisational practices, a new ethos, new attitudes start to manifest themselves?**
- RG: I don't really know, I wasn't there long enough for that. I left in '92 so I was there I think sufficient to see the pressures that were coming on Emeka but I didn't see them actually in operation. I only read about them and heard about them from colleagues and so on, but I wasn't part of the receiving end at that stage.
- SO: Also in terms of transition: this was also the time of transition of South Africa towards black majority rule. I was just wondering were you a part of, or were you privy to any of the Commonwealth's varied contributions in that process of transition. Your former ComSec colleague, Carl Wright was helping to run workshops in Harare to help the ANC to work out its policy strategies. I know that Chief Emeka went down from the Harare CHOGM to South Africa to see in what ways the Commonwealth could support transition.**
- RG: Again by '94 I had left the Secretariat but I was involved with South Africa in another way because I had joined the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and we tried to help with the parliamentary systems. So I did get involved with the South African Parliament in some of their problems and changes and so on. It all went quite smoothly, quite well. But I remember the problems that some of the white South African officials thought they could have when coming to Commonwealth meetings and it was interesting to see the relief in their eyes when they found that all the black countries of Africa were lining up to shake hands with them rather than showing the hostility that they were expecting. In fact one of them told me exactly that at the end of the first seminar I ran for them.
- SO: I do know that the Commonwealth's contribution in terms of expertise and facilitation are really understudied areas of the Secretariat's activity. Moses Anafu effectively became known as 'Mr Africa'.**
- RG: Yes, there was a lot of that going on to which I was not privy really. I wouldn't be able to expand too much on this. But the contacts kept going for a long time. One of those which I was involved in from that period in the Youth Programme was the third Southern African country that I haven't mentioned; that's Namibia. The UN had a training centre in Zambia for young Namibians who were exiles and the Director of that was a man whose name later became famous, Hage Geingob. He became the first Prime Minister. I co-ordinated with him in providing some assistance on the development front for his programme and I also managed to pass off some bits of technical assistance through the Zambian process to him as they were always in need of help. But the Namibian exercise was again a different type from either Zimbabwe or South Africa; it went off comparatively smoothly once they'd sorted out their internal problems.
- SO: Yes, the role of the Contact Group and the enormous wealth of international goodwill in supporting Namibia through its transition in '90- '91. Was the Commonwealth Youth Programme also closely tied up**

with Commonwealth scholarships in the UK and opportunities for Commonwealth students to come and study in this particular country?

RG: No, that would have been within the CFTC's Education and Training Programme.

SO: I just wondered if there was any collaboration.

RG: No, we used to arrange within the CYP funding for people from different continents to go through our Youth Development courses in the other places if they wanted to see how things were going. For instance, we might have an Australian attending a course in Africa and so on; so there was that kind of connection but it was in relation to the Diploma programme in Youth and Development. We did various other things in my time. We created, for instance, a Commonwealth Youth Service Awards Scheme to recognise youth projects of quality at each of our centres which were funded through each of our centres and we used to make them an award at the end of it. The programme is still going on, I notice, under a different name. I noticed on the internet that they have just made three awards in the last week or something like that. One of them I was happy to see was to Sri Lanka.

There were two particular CYP projects you might like to hear about. One used the concept of microfinance: we didn't use the word at that time but that was what it was. We used to give small loans to, say, young fishermen in Mauritius (as Joe Massallay, our African Regional Director did) for them to buy a boat on the basis that with part of their profits from their fishing they would pay us back in instalments; if they didn't pay it back, there were really no sanctions that we could apply. It was an act of faith, but it was an act of faith on the other side too; they were very, very proud to come back and pay us bits and pieces from time to time, to say 'Right we've done it and thank you very much for letting us do it.'

Another project was in India, this was not micro-financing, this was a completely different kind of thing. In Kerala, the most literate Indian state, our Regional Director, Devendra Agochiya, identified one of the places there which were about 90% literate, which is exceedingly high. And on looking into it he found that the people who were keeping the percentage down from going to 100 were the older people of course and he had a brilliant idea.

SO: Addressing adult literacy problems?

RG: Yes, but who were to teach them? The answer that was developed was to use the children and young people. We got the young people to train their parents to read, to write and to handle numbers and the programme was to end in a way that we had not foreseen. It was to end in tears, tears of joy, the emotions were so great, the parents realising their children were able to teach them and feeling so grateful that they have got their children educated, and the children feeling that they were giving something back to their parents, not taking from them. The parents were now able to then go to the shops with more confidence and buy requirements in the village shops that they'd never been able to do before. So that was the kind of project that the Youth Programme sometimes used to get involved in which were very important from the point of view of community development.

SO: I'm very interested in this question of you trying microfinance as this is in the days before Muhammad Yunus.

RG: Yes, long before microfinance was spoken of as microfinance. When these young people came asking for money for the boats and so on, the Regional Director had to tell them that there was no way that he could afford to give money to buy a boat, but he could help them to go some way towards it. And from that it went on to various other projects like small scale domestic sewing schemes with groups of young girls getting together and buying a sewing machine or two and producing things for their community, selling them. And then the one machine became two and three and so it went.

SO: So what was the cross-fertilisation between CFTC and what was then the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA)? Was there close collaboration?

RG: There was collaboration yes, and there was cross-fertilisation. I think people like Peter Snelson would often get in touch with their counterparts in what is now DFID and say, 'Look there's this kind of thing that has come up, would you be interested in it? We don't have the money for it.' Not just DFID probably but with CIDA in Canada and the Australians and the New Zealanders as well.

SO: Did you yourself in your headship of these two Divisions have close collaboration with British civil servants, or not?

RG: Oh yes, very close. For instance, the overall policy and governance of the Youth Programme was in the hands of an entity called the Commonwealth Youth Affairs Council, which consisted of Commonwealth Youth Ministers. And one of the things I did, just to drag you away briefly from your question, was I managed to get a young person on to the Youth Affairs Council. The Council accepted that they should also have one young person from somewhere at the table at the same level as the Ministers, but able to speak for youth in general, coming from anywhere in the Commonwealth, and we left it to the young people to choose their representative. The Youth Affairs Council was the body that told the Director of CYP 'This is the kind of thing that we need done. This is your programme for the next two years.' Of course I was preparing programme options for them, then there was the budget as well as the programmes, and they would approve it. But yes, there was very close collaboration with governmental organisations. And we also encouraged what was called South-South cooperation.

SO: You left the Secretariat in 1992 but your continuing association with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association mean you have maintained your linkages there. Were you part of any other Commonwealth Observer Groups?

RG: There were two that I was involved in. One was Zimbabwe in 1980 --

SO: That's the one you've mentioned earlier. I just wondered if there were any others?

RG: Yes the other was Uganda, a few months after that, in December 1980 after the Amin period and that was another very difficult observer group. That was

one in which we had soldiers firing in to our hotel. And we have a tape of the shots being fired and various people talking and saying silly things to each other – shall we get under tables and that type of thing you say to each other in situations that you would have never met before.

SO: I know from going through the files at the Secretariat that the hope was that with the Commonwealth election observers' success in Zimbabwe that this could be replicated in Uganda. This was at the invitation of the Ugandan Government, but it seems to have been a remarkably fraught situation with the contestation between the four political parties, fragile peace across the country, and tensions within the military. Was police provision of security adequate?

RG: It was. The Ugandan one was much, much more difficult. In fact we pulled out and left just a core set of people there for the end of it. It was very difficult and an almost impossible situation. The Elections Commissioner was in grave danger; he wanted to flee the country. He wanted our assistance to flee the country which we couldn't give him, as it would have seriously affected our impartiality. He finally came over to England after everything was over, but it was a very difficult situation, a very unsatisfactory situation.

SO: Was it principally because there weren't sufficient conditions of peace and security in the wider country? I know that there were problems with transport, in accessing and surveying the election arrangements so that the area that you were being obliged to cover was particularly large, as well as the circumstances of coming out of long conflict?

RG: You're absolutely right, yes; it was a much wider area that we had to cover, areas where we had no experience of working in previously. I remember I was in Uganda, I was with a team in the centre; I was coordinating a unit outside and I remember some of our colleagues in Goma phoning us and telling us we're in great trouble and it looks like they're going to fire on us. And we couldn't give any advice; we just didn't know what to say. It was very difficult there.

SO: As a historian, I'm particularly struck by the energy and focus that was directed at Zimbabwean multi-party elections which themselves were hugely fraught. Christopher Soames, the Governor, was under enormous pressure from all sides - the international community, from inside, from the Rhodesians, from the South Africans. I've written on how he and his team managed to pull it off: it was 'good enough'. But I know that he was assisted by a particular team of former British colonial officials. I don't know whether the election commission in Uganda had the same capacity in addition, as you say, to the election monitoring reports.

RG: Not at all.

SO: So resources were spread remarkably thin?

RG: Oh yes - their resources were more or less non-existent after Amin's time, after everything he had been doing. They had to set it up almost afresh with people who knew something about what elections meant.

SO: Mr Gomez, do you think that the difficulties surrounding the Ugandan Observer Mission was part of the reason why the Commonwealth didn't replicate electoral observer missions until Chief Emeka revived it in the 1990s? In that decade there were about 22 election observer missions. I'm particularly struck by that lull between Uganda and the COGs of the 90s.

RG: Well, it was not only a lull. I think operations were at quite a different level. We put in resources into Zimbabwe and into Uganda which we just would not have been able to do on a continuing basis. The later operations have been much smaller. Teams of five or six people with two or three officials often going on a little bit ahead preparing the ground, coming off 2 days afterwards after putting out a basic note and then saying their report will follow. But the Ugandan and Zimbabwean exercises were much more complex, much more resource utilising than we can afford to run now. There was another interesting event that took place in Zimbabwe which I must tell you about. In the area that I was working we had helicopters coming in and dropping leaflets, helicopters coming in from South Africa and I complained to the elections people – not the British elections people, I mean the local provincial commissioner about this – and he gave me the answer he expected, 'How could I know they came from above? They could have been spread by people on the ground.' So I said 'What have I got to do to prove, or anyone to prove, that they came from the skies and therefore they were not authorised because flights should not be taking place at that time?' He said they'd have to be caught before they touched the ground.

SO: (Laughs)

RG: It was a challenge I could not ignore. The next time I heard a helicopter, my colleague Dominic Sankey and I ran out. We raced underneath, pulled out one in the hand as it fell, ran to the provincial commissioner and said we are ready to swear that this came from the skies and he believed us (laughs). It was amusing, but it was a challenge we had to accept!

SO: I'm sorry: the image that conjures up is really very comic!

RG: Absolutely - that's why I told you the story! And we didn't prove in the end that it didn't touch the ground. But I wanted to have the moral right and conviction to say, yes this came from a plane. It's not from the ground and I think the way that my colleague and I said it, it really convinced the man and of course as the helicopter had gone in a few minutes; he didn't see the helicopter dropping papers.

Another great experience I had, which was a rather frightening experience, was when I suddenly got a report from someone when I was in the hotel that there was a leg to be seen in a certain part of the town, just after a bomb had gone off. All that remained of the person was a leg. And the person who came to me was very proud to be able to tell me it was a white man's leg. The implication was clear: a white bomber had killed himself in the act. So of course I ran there, but when I reached there it was a black leg – someone had managed a substitution. I don't know from where they managed to get a black leg, but they'd substituted it for a white leg. But that was the kind of situation we had to handle.

SO: Oh, the dirty tricks that were going on in that 1980 Zimbabwe election.

RG: The dirty tricks. Then the newspaper *Moto*, the Catholic newspaper that used to be published in Southern Africa.

SO: There was a fake copy, wasn't there, that was put out?

RG: There was a fake copy and I have the original and the fake at home, somewhere in my archives.

SO: And then there was also the bombing of the Mambo opposition press offices in Gwelo?

RG: Yes. One of the mistakes they made in the fake copy of *Moto* was that for 23rd February they put 32nd February, doing it so fast they got the digits wrong.

SO: Abuses on all sides.

In the Witness Seminar we are organising we're only going to have an hour and a half to weave together different peoples' narratives of the Secretariat in their particular time. What do you think will be particularly valuable from your point of view? Which themes should we stress to make sure that they are read in to the record, that I can get other witnesses to comment on, to make sure that each individual testimony genuinely interacts?

RG: Right: well, in terms of commonality of themes I think one that you'll always have from everyone else is this business of the Commonwealth and its networking capacity. I think the Commonwealth as a network is key: a network which cannot be provided by the United Nations or the European Union or any other body that I can think of. And I think that's one of its greatest strengths and I'm not sure that it's being used to the extent that it could be used. It's a small organisation; it will continue to be a small organisation. I remember at one stage I used to give the statistic that the whole of Commonwealth expenditure for a year was the same as the United Nations was spending in Bosnia-Herzegovina in a day at one stage, at the worst time there. We will continue to be small financially. We have two economic giants, two of the G8s, but that's all. Australia and India of course will be added, the other two big players, in due course. We cannot do things in any other way except by processes of consensus and inter-country trust. This was one of the things that struck me when I went round countries, if when I said something they would just accept that I was telling the truth. I remember being asked intellectually testing questions but not from 'well I think you're passing a fast one on us' kind of way. I remember discussing this with one of the people in countries like Australia and as far apart as Australia, Mauritius and so on and I said, 'You've been very kind to me. I thought you'd give me a harder time.' and they said things like, 'No, with the Commonwealth we are more willing to take things as said; we wouldn't expect you to say things that we could later find were untrue.'

SO: So there's no suspicion of hidden agendas?

RG: No, certainly not at that time. No, the hidden agenda concept did not exist.

SO: There have been conspiracy theories as well, as you say.

RG: We would also speak with them very freely and say 'Look this is off-the-record, I'm telling you that this country, your neighbouring country or whatever, has some concerns on this front, whether you would be contributing in this way or whether you'll want this youth project to go ahead, would you support it?' And they'd give a very frank answer and observe a courteous confidentiality about it.

SO: Do you think then it's a problem of subsequent Secretary's General writing their memoirs, which are then particularly confiding? Does that help to undercut the role of discreet diplomacy because individuals may be concerned that it may come out what they have agreed privately?

RG: Well, I think when memoirs are written, things that were said privately should never ever come out. It might be 20 or 30 years after, one wouldn't bother about them, but not in the very recent years. I think all diplomats should observe that, not falling to the kiss-and-tell temptations.

SO: I know: the megaphone diplomacy, immediately scuttling to the papers. So for the Commonwealth Secretariat Witness seminar, we should explore themes of networking capacity, themes of connectivity. As you say, there is economic power and political power but it's precisely the ability of others to tap in to that, which the ComSec as centre has provided. We should also emphasise the process of consensus and inter-country trust, and the role of discreet diplomacy?

RG: Yes I think that more or less summarises it.

SO: Mr Gomez, thank you very much.

RG: Thank you.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]