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Key:

SO: Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

MF: Mr Michael Frendo (Respondent)

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SO: This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Michael Frendo on Friday, 31st January 2014. Mr Frendo, thank you very much indeed for coming to Senate House to talk to us for the Commonwealth Oral History Project. I wonder if you could begin, please, by setting out your view of the awareness and value of the Commonwealth for you, as a Maltese politician, but also for your country.

MF: Well, I would say that the Commonwealth is a reality which is quite well known in Malta. People know that Malta belongs to the Commonwealth, obviously, and because it's also part of our history. Since we only became independent in 1964, I think there's a general consciousness that after independence we became members of the Council of Europe, members of the United Nations and members of the Commonwealth. Clearly, now that we are members of the European Union, that takes centre stage. But still, there is a consciousness of the Commonwealth, and the 2005 CHOGM organised in Malta helped very much to highlight the Commonwealth as a reality.

Before I was elected as an MP, I was very conscious of the Commonwealth and of the concept of the Commonwealth family. I can't say it was very clear what the 'value added' of being a member of the Commonwealth was. It's something that's still being discussed now, but certainly there was nobody who ever suggested we should leave the Commonwealth. It was very interesting that all our political leaders since independence up to today have at no point ever discussed the issue of whether or not we should be members of the Commonwealth. That included Mr Dom Mintoff, who had lots of issues with the British government.

SO: Indeed.

MF: But not with Britain as such, I don't think. That included also the Nationalist Party, I have to say. The Nationalist Party was actually set up in 1800 to obtain independence from the British. So, the Nationalist Party was the party in government when we became independent in 1964, and it was the party that emphasised our membership of the Commonwealth. So, there is a general consensus about membership of the Commonwealth in the country.

As an MP, I came across some very interesting experiences in terms of the Commonwealth. I think the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association does great work, and when you're a Member of Parliament, it gives you an international dimension which is very useful – particularly if you come from a small island state; you can exchange experiences and views. As a minister – I was Minister for Youth – I remember attending a Commonwealth Youth Ministers meeting in the Maldives which, again, was very interesting because you were exchanging experiences. I think the first-hand exchange of experiences between people who have responsibilities for certain sectors in a country is invaluable, and you can learn much more than if you read about it. Obviously, also, [there are] the contacts and the networks which developed from that. So, I'm not sure whether I agree with this Maltese journalist who described the Commonwealth in 2005 as a "bag of contradictions and massive misfits."

SO: That was a direct quote from an article by Derek Ingram, who is, of course, a leading Commonwealth journalist...

MF: Yes.

SO: He was reporting on the Valletta CHOGM in 2005. He didn't say which Maltese journalist it was who described the Commonwealth in such terms!

MF: *[Laughter]*

SO: I think the Commonwealth is an extraordinary association because it has the showcase of the heads of government meeting, but then, as you've said, it's the wider family which is of critical importance in providing those knowledge and personal networks.

MF: Yes. I have to say that when I was Minister of Foreign Affairs, I utilised this to the full. For a small country, it is important for you to find affinity with other states, and in fact whenever I was speaking to a Commonwealth country – even on bilateral issues or even on EU issues – I would bring up the connection. It would almost come up in a natural way, that we were both members of the Commonwealth. I think it creates a certain sense of affinity, which is very difficult to pin down, but it's a sense of belonging to the same club. Perhaps having undergone the same colonial experiences, having similar structures in Parliament, particularly, or in the Civil Service, where very often the structures are similar, and sometimes even the terminologies are the same... Malta doesn't have the affinity of common law, because we are a civil law country, but that affinity, I think, helps, and it creates a sense of greater trust somehow. When you are talking to the Foreign Minister of another Commonwealth country, you identify yourselves as Foreign Ministers of two Commonwealth states. When I was Minister of Foreign Affairs, we also

utilised this – the Commonwealth connection – to the full whenever we had a candidate for a post at the UN.

SO: The use of the Commonwealth as ‘smart power’?

MF: That was really useful, because you could have a sort of introductory card to our ambassadors who would meet, and again, that was another dimension. As a small state, there is no dimension which is yours which you should ever give up, and that, to us, is what the Commonwealth dimension means. It’s the dimension to our reach as a small state – which, therefore, increases our relevance. And that’s why I think nobody has ever thought of giving this up.

On the other hand, Malta would like to take a lead in certain areas in the Commonwealth. We took a certain lead in ICT – Information and Communication Technologies – with the ‘Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development’, COMNET-IT, which is a foundation set up for the dissemination of ICT in the Commonwealth. I hope we made some contribution when I was Chair of Commonwealth Connects, which had started under Don McKinnon, and hopefully we made a contribution when we were members and later Chair of CMAG. But perhaps the one thing which made a difference – at least in these last years – was holding CHOGM in Malta. That increased the relevance bilaterally beyond the importance of the Commonwealth itself.

SO: If I could take you to this, because the decision to hold the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta in 2005 would have been taken at the Abuja meeting in 2003, or in the interim between the Abuja CHOGM and the following year. When was the decision made for Malta’s offer to hold the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Valletta?

MF: I think the decision was made in the preceding CHOGM at Abuja. As far as I recollect, it was Abuja. It was Prime Minister Fenech Adami who was still there as Prime Minister. It was his last CHOGM, and he decided to take this on. There was a change of Prime Ministers from the same party in between, and I happened to be Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time. I was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2004, so I was, to a large extent, involved in the organisation of the Malta CHOGM. What was interesting was that the Malta CHOGM was the first time we gave a specific role to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. I can remember from when I became Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2004, that in discussions with Don McKinnon it was clear that there was a willingness to give a role to the foreign ministers rather than having them as part of the delegation with the heads of governments with no particular function. I was entrusted with the idea: to try and give that a life of its own.

I have to say that we discussed the various items which we were going to put on the agenda, which included migration [and] it included climate change – those are the two that I remember very clearly in my mind. And what I did was set a rule that there should be no written speeches, that there should be open discussion, [and] that one should speak between three and five minutes. We also [did] a lot of preparatory work for each foreign minister to receive a background note on each subject, and at the end of that background note we also asked three questions that the ministers might wish to address.

So, we tried to channel the discussion around the number of topics. To a large extent, I was using a model that I had been familiar with in the European Convention on the Future of Europe, chaired by Giscard d'Estaing, when we drafted the Constitution for Europe, and that was using a two/three page paper as a background for its subject, and one of those pages would be three questions that the ministers might wish to address. It worked brilliantly. We had a very lively discussion; we had a discussion that went around the room. The ministers were feeling that they were debating [and] not reading texts to each other – there was interaction – and I have to say that it worked extremely well.

The thing which we introduced at the Malta CHOGM was the meeting with civil society. This was greatly wished for by civil society – it had been discussed at length with the Secretariat. There were fears that we would have a sort of G8-style of demonstrations and protests if we did this, but of course, this did not take place. We structured it in [such] a way that we had civil society engage with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, so it gave another role to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs – to engage with civil society on Commonwealth issues. And that was a free session where representatives of civil society came round the table with all the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. I have to say, there was huge participation by the ministers. I think they were all there, and we had an exchange of views which went extremely well. I think it opened, also, the way for this sort of direct linkage between civil society [as] normally represented by the Commonwealth Foundation and civil society groupings directly with the member states, as represented by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

I think those were the two innovations which we had. We introduced another innovation when we were Chair-in-Office. We introduced an informal session complementary to the session which foreign ministers have on the side of the United Nations General Assembly. That session of foreign ministers is normally quite formal, with a very formal agenda. We introduced a lunchtime open discussion for foreign ministers at the UN, so that we could discuss other issues which were of interest to us, even in the inner context of the UN. This was an informal working lunch. Although it was not modelled on it, I would say it was similar to the informal lunches of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the EU, where you have ministers only, and that was a 'ministers only' lunch.

SO: So, no officials?

MF: No officials, no record, no notes and no statements: simply an exchange of views, open, on a number of issues, just to get the feeling of where we stand on certain issues. And I'm afraid I can't remember what the agenda was, but it is easily obtainable from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

SO: So, you initiated this in 2006?

MF: 2006. We did it...I don't know whether we did it once or did it twice. I don't think it was taken up by the following Chair-in-Office, which is a pity, because it created a sense of camaraderie within the UN, which is what we were trying to achieve, which went beyond just having a formal meeting. And it was very well attended, by the way; surprisingly so.

SO: Michael, please, could I ask you about this growing role for foreign ministers? You appear to be emphasizing the re-injection of a degree of spontaneity, trust and sharing, and a focus on key questions – rather than taking particular platforms or standpoints and reading out great speeches – with the innovation of the foreign ministers meeting with civil society groupings in Valletta. In what way did this inadvertently eclipse the heads aspect [of the CHOGM]? Do busy heads – if they feel that their foreign ministers are taking a growing role or a particular activity on a brief – in your experience, do they devolve to them that responsibility, and step back and concentrate their own energy somewhere else?

MF: Well, it was actually intended for the heads to have even more leeway as to what they want to do with their time. I remember discussing this with Don McKinnon, and the idea was that we'd refrain from formalising the Retreat and the meetings of the heads. I think we managed to do that without, in any way, usurping the territory of the heads. On the other hand, the heads could discuss any other issues which were of interest to them. What was important in all of this? And why am I emphasising the spontaneity, etc. etc.? I think it is the spirit of the Commonwealth. If the Commonwealth does not have the spirit of informality, and it does not the spirit of friendship, I think it loses a major asset. And that's how we tried to carry out even the discussions between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. We did not necessarily have, let's say, consensual, quiet discussions. For example, on the issue of migration, we had a very heated discussion. [*Laughter*]

SO: I can well imagine how robust that was!

MF: You can imagine that Malta would have looked at that as a country of destination, or a country of transit. And there were a number of countries of origin of migration which were also around the table. On the issue of climate change, we had big issues, because we had major polluters around the table, too – notably, India – and therefore they were very sensitive to certain statements. But it was an open discussion: people could say exactly how they felt. There had already been an agreement on the final declaration at the 'committee of the whole', so we didn't really go into too much nitty-gritty. I don't recall us going into much nitty-gritty on the declaration from the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. Actually, the Declaration of CHOGM was not from the ministers, but it was the ministers who negotiated that. I think the heads came out with a communiqué, is that right?

SO: Yes, the delegates issued the Valletta Declaration of Multilateral Trade.

MF: Which is a two-page statement.

SO: It refers to three various subsidies, particularly agricultural subsidies. They also called for a renewal of democracy.

MF: And what was interesting at that time was that it was preceding the new round of Doha. And, actually, that issue came out very clearly, and Malta and the UK took a very active role in agreeing the Declaration. If you read the Declaration, it's a Declaration which supports very much small states and developing countries, and a number of countries within the EU later took umbrage to the fact that two EU member states had with them the contacts of

the Commonwealth. You won't find this written anywhere, but I know that there were rumblings, that people were not happy with [the fact] that both the UK and Malta – and Cyprus – had participated and given their assent to that sort of Declaration which, to some extent, put the EU on the spot.

SO: Oh, they'd stepped outside the EU tent?

MF: Exactly. So, we'd stepped outside the EU tent, and that was a little bit... People got edgy about that.

SO: But there were no formal representations?

MF: No, But I remember officials from my ministry relating to me that in meetings this had been mentioned, and formally that other countries didn't like it at all. I don't know which countries of the EU, but other countries in the EU.

SO: I've been told that Don McKinnon was quite explicit in trying to use the Commonwealth to leverage more states on the issue of finance, and also particularly on the issue of trade. How does this accord with your own experience of his strategy as Secretary General?

MF: Yes, but we were in agreement with that. We felt that we should give as much support as we can to those states. I think [that], in the declaration, we made some references to the EU relationship with small states. This is what got a little bit tricky, because we made direct reference. If you read through that, you will find a direct reference to the fact that, at that time, I think, economic partnership agreements were being discussed and negotiated between the European Union and some Commonwealth member states: the Caribbean comes to mind. By showing support for them, it was seen a little bit that we went beyond our EU brief. But that's what the Commonwealth does. You can push the frontiers a little bit – maybe not too much, but you can push the frontiers a little bit. There are three countries in the EU that are members of the Commonwealth, and I have to say, when we were Chair-in-Office – just on another point – we did intervene on Commonwealth or Commonwealth-related issues in the EU. Now, I did that as Minister of Foreign Affairs within the Foreign Affairs Council of the EU, because I wanted to keep increasing the relevance of my country in the EU. So, in a way, we utilised the fact that we were Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth to show that Malta had other dimensions and that within the EU family, now we could also speak about issues relating to Commonwealth member states, which is something I would not do otherwise. So, for example, even though it's no longer a Commonwealth member state, Malta took a very active part in discussions within the EU foreign ministers meeting on how to deal with Zimbabwe. We took part in discussions relating to Fiji and to other Commonwealth countries. At the time, we also had just finished our term of office as Chair of CMAG, so, we could speak about certain situations with certain direct knowledge. That increased our relevance as a small state within the EU.

So, the Commonwealth, in my opinion, can help small states to be relevant – not only within the Commonwealth, but to be relevant also in other organisations like the UN and other regional organisations, or sub-regional organisations. In our case [and] in the case of Cyprus – and the UK, to some extent – this was an issue of relevance when we were settling issues on countries in the EU that were also member states of the Commonwealth.

SO: Yes.

MF: You asked me about the Cyprus issue. That's an important issue for us. We've always shown a lot of support for Cyprus. Cyprus is very often an ally of ours within the context of the EU. The Cypriots, I have to say, lobbied us – me, in particular – quite strongly about a good paragraph about their situation in the final declaration for the Malta CHOGM. And, in fact, they got a very good paragraph supporting them in the declaration, which was prepared by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

SO: Was this prepared by you and your officials?

MF: [It was] suggested by them and brought to the discussion of everyone. But, of course, there were discussions on that, because although Turkey is not a member of the Commonwealth, of course, Turkey is a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and it does raise issues; there are countries who would speak for Turkey on that issue. So, Cyprus was very pleased with that paragraph in the declaration – I'm speaking about CHOGM 2005 – and I know that when the President of Cyprus went back to Cyprus, this was an issue with the press: that the Commonwealth had given strong support for Cyprus on the issue of the division of the island.

So, that was an important issue. I don't think that the Commonwealth affected my work very much as Minister of Transport and Communications, other than keeping in touch with other Commonwealth Ministers. I don't recall that we had a meeting of Ministers.

SO: You had mentioned particularly Malta supporting the work on ICT. Obviously, this concerned particularly telecommunications?

MF: Yes, but that came later, because I was Minister of Foreign Affairs then. Indirectly, I suppose, when I was Minister of Transport and Communications, there was already COMNET-IT set up. And I think that was what our contribution to the Commonwealth was at the time. I was Parliamentary Secretary – Junior Minister – of Foreign Affairs for two months. I became a full rank Minister after that. *[Laughter]*

SO: *[Laughter]* You were promoted very swiftly! Excellent. You've emphasised very much your awareness of the Commonwealth and your belief in the Commonwealth. Were you unusual in the Cabinet or in your party in this particular attachment to the value of the Commonwealth? Or was this a general sense within the party? Did you share this with your Prime Minister?

MF: I definitely shared it with the Prime Minister. I think other ministers tended to have a little bit less of an intensive relationship with the Commonwealth.

SO: In part because of their different portfolios?

MF: Yes, but then there are meetings of Commonwealth ministers on subjects like education, for example, and there would be regular meetings of Commonwealth Ministers of Education. So, some particular ministers would have a stronger relation with the Commonwealth than others. And I think it is

very much driven by how much the Commonwealth is engaging with countries on specific subjects. I would mention the Minister of Education, in particular, as another minister who was really conscious of being in the Commonwealth.

We are also quite conscious – as Malta – of something that has a bit fallen by the wayside but which remains very much in our collective psyche, I suppose, which is that we have the oldest university in the Commonwealth outside the UK. The University of Malta is the oldest university in the Commonwealth, outside the UK. It was founded in the 1500s and then raised in the 1600s to University status. I don't think there are other 400 to 450 year old universities in the Commonwealth outside the UK. And, in any case, that may not be true, but that's what our perception is of ourselves! *[Laughter]*

SO: A sense of being a centre of learning?

MF: Initially there was a sense that we could have developed as a Commonwealth university, as well. I think that is something which is on the increase now. There's a lot of internationalisation of the university going on, and that could be another function of the Commonwealth: engaging with the Ministry of Education and with the Rector of the University, which is of course an autonomous institution.

SO: The Commonwealth of Learning was established at the Vancouver CHOGM in 1987. It seems to me that the whole university network of the Commonwealth of Learning operates in a slightly autonomous sphere – apart from the more traditional diplomacy and other soft power engagement of the Commonwealth. Would you concur with that?

MF: I don't know enough about it to concur with that. *[Laughter]*

SO: Well, the very fact that you're saying that suggests that it does seem to operate in a separate sphere.

MF: Yes, it operates, I think, in a different sphere from traditional diplomacy. It came very much to the forefront during my time serving as Minister of Foreign Affairs: it was there, but it didn't really engage with us very much. I think we tried to engage with it when we were developing Commonwealth Connects as a repository of knowledge and expertise we were trying to share across the Commonwealth.

The original idea was that we should be sharing expertise and experience, and the idea was that those countries with the best expertise and experience in the Commonwealth should be exchanging that expertise and experience with those countries which needed it. So, it was a developmental approach, and the Commonwealth of Learning would have been part of that process in terms of ICT. We were limiting it to ICT, and therefore, for example, a country which would be the size of Malta, an island state – another island in the Commonwealth which had not the same level of development of ICT that Malta had – could benefit from Malta's direct experience. That was the idea of Commonwealth Connects, initially.

SO: Please, if I could just ask you a little more about ICT? You emphasised this was very much a Maltese initiative, with Maltese diplomacy helping to drive this idea forward in conjunction with the Secretary General and

Secretariat in London? Or was this something of which Malta wanted to take ownership, and was providing particular expertise and also finance?

MF: No, Malta took a leadership [role] in this, with the setting of COMNET-IT. [COMNET-IT] was a foundation related to developing the knowledge and spreading the knowledge of ICT in the Commonwealth. Commonwealth Connects was not, initially, a Malta initiative. It was an initiative which had developed earlier, [and] I think it was through the Secretariat. Malta came in to give an added contribution, essentially through my chairmanship of that grouping which was called 'ICT for Development', and we changed that to Commonwealth Connects. There is a full report which was presented to the Kampala CHOGM which you might want to have a look at. There's a full printed report and published report on ICT for Development, Commonwealth Connects, what we've done and what we intend to still do. It has some grand projects. One of them was called the 'hole in the wall'. We were taking the experience of India of introducing computer terminals, computer screens and the use of internet in slum areas, and the idea was to transpose that experience into Africa and therefore take the Indian experience of taking ICT into disadvantaged communities and create ICT kiosks with four or five terminals. And, actually, the first one was launched in the Kampala CHOGM, in Kampala – I hope it's still there. There is an ICT kiosk with five terminals in one of the poorest areas of Kampala, outside a school close to the town centre, for the use of all the community and also for the use of the schools – in other words, as part of the learning process of the schools themselves. In India, the experience of introducing them showed that, actually, there were other benefits resulting from it: that the young people had developed a set of rules to allow more people to make use of it, so you had a time limit on how long you could be there. It was a self-regulating type of system which developed slowly, and people were introducing themselves to the cyber world.

This is part of the [work] which Commonwealth Connects wants to do. Another project of Commonwealth Connects – which was then taken up by the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation – was to map the areas of reach of internet connectivity in the whole of Commonwealth Africa, and therefore to identify those spots where there was still no connectivity where people were living, and, on that basis, to try develop a policy to fill in those spots and therefore have connectivity spread throughout the Commonwealth.

SO: Michael, how much has this excellent developmental idea to stimulate ICT hotspots in deprived areas – which could then act as focal points for communities, for schools and also for entrepreneurial activity – then become eclipsed by the rollout of satellite phone coverage and the development of mobile phone software technology, which could then provide banking facilities and information?

MF: That was already there when we were doing this. It was very clear that mobile telephony – particularly in Africa – was going to be the technology that, in effect, increased connectivity exponentially in Africa. Still, however, we thought that the availability of a screen and of internet connectivity – not via the mobile phone – was still of use. So, it's complementary to it. I don't think it was eclipsed by it; I think it was very much complementary to it.

One of the studies on connectivity also included the spread of mobile telephony, and – if I could put on my hat as a former Minister of Telecommunications – one of the biggest threats that you can have to development in telecommunications is if you give licences to operators to operate in the major urban areas, which is where they make their money, without imposing on them some level of universal service obligation. In other words, without imposing on them some roll-out obligation to those rural areas which are more sparsely populated, but which perhaps need the connectivity even more than the urban areas. So, the idea of taking a picture of the coverage available in Africa – particularly in Commonwealth Africa, which the CTO has been working on and I think is still working on – was intended to highlight those areas which were still without any level of coverage, even mobile telephony, because mobile and internet will go together now. And so, one of the grand projects of Commonwealth Connects was also to try and encourage this level of connectivity and to try and influence governments to push through this rollout.

SO: As you say, it's to try to overcome the blockages or limitations of infrastructure, and that includes limited landline coverage.

MF: Absolutely.

SO: Mobile phone coverage is something on which African Commonwealth countries have made an exponential leap.

MF: I don't know whether you're aware that one of the biggest problems which fixed-line telephony had in Africa was that companies used to lay two copper lines: a real one, which would be at the bottom, and one which would be on top of it, which was there to be stolen.

SO: Absolutely.

MF: [*Laughter*] So, it was quite expensive, because you were laying two lines. Mobile telephony changed all that, because you could reach [new areas] without having to do that. Still, one of the biggest developments in East Africa in particular was the landing of marine cables in Kenya. And, of course, there had been other projects. One of the projects [involved] laying a marine fibre optic cable around the whole of Africa, and then have a sort of wheel and spokes approach.

SO: I've seen a map of this fibre optic cable route, with port points in East Africa, in South Africa and then there's another point of entry up near the Gulf of Guinea.

MF: Yes. These are fairly recent developments. Telecommunications is the infrastructure of infrastructures. In a modern world, you are unable to develop your port facilities without telecommunications. You're unable to develop your industrial facilities without telecommunications. Malta is a small island state, on the periphery of its major markets in Europe, [and] has learned that and luckily learned that in the 80s, which meant that we have taken a lot of investment. I can give you one recent example. A company that produces very specialised lenses for glasses in Malta purchased equipment – very sophisticated equipment – from Germany. All the servicing of that equipment

takes place remotely over the communication lines in Germany – so, from Germany to Malta. They had a fault in the machine. No technician would come, but they would fix it from Germany, and that means you're no longer in the periphery. If you are somewhere lost in the middle of a very sparsely populated part of the country, if you have telecommunications you are no longer isolated, and that has a huge, huge impact on the economy.

SO: Michael, if I could take us from discussing the importance of the telecommunications sector and Maltese diplomacy toward your own personal experiences of the Commonwealth. You mentioned CMAG, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group. The critical issues that confronted you as Foreign Minister on this body were Fiji, Pakistan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, which of course stepped outside the Commonwealth in 2003, at the Abuja meeting.

MF: There were some other countries that got on to the CMAG agenda. As you know, countries don't like to be on the CMAG agenda, and that shows you the effectiveness of CMAG. Even if a country is not being formally engaged by CMAG, the moment it appears on the agenda it's a sort of signalling for the country to take note. My experience of CMAG was a very positive one. I think it's one of the most impressive institutions which exists in the Commonwealth. I think it is highly undervalued and it can be an example for other organisations. I have the impression that the African Union has something a little bit similar, but I don't know how it's working. CMAG, in my experience, was working extremely well.

SO: How did it work? Were there regular meetings? Or were they ad hoc and convened as the Secretary General or indeed the new members of CMAG felt appropriate? How was the agenda formulated? Did you have to be entirely responsive, or could you identify countries in which there were problems and bring them to the agenda?

MF: In terms of meeting, there was one fixed meeting which was the meeting on the margins of UN General Assembly. And there would be at least [one] other meeting during the year, but meetings would take place as needed. And, in fact, when there was the coup d'état in Fiji, we obviously needed to meet. I remember Don McKinnon had spoken to me; we agreed that there had to be a meeting and we should wait to give time for the Foreign Minister of Papua New Guinea who was from the region to get to the meeting. So, we did not really want to hold the meeting without having at least one member from that region present, because there is a little bit of this understanding in CMAG that if there's a problem in a region, then the other members of the region will be given a little bit more weight in terms of the opinions which they express. So, the only concession we had for not holding a meeting immediately but holding it a few days later was to allow the Foreign Minister of Papua New Guinea to get to London.

Similarly with Pakistan, when we had been completely exasperated by the intransigence of President Musharraf and when we had seen that nothing could be done to save the situation – when Musharraf technically carried out a coup d'état against himself by suspending the Constitutional Court and suspending the Constitution...

SO: And his declaration of the state of emergency, and sacking of their top judges...

MF: ...everything outside the parameters of the constitution – then we called an immediate meeting there. So, meetings were held as needed, but I think on average twice a year.

The setting of the agenda was very much driven by the SG and the Secretariat. I have to say that – at least in my experience – because the resources of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malta are limited in terms of reach for all the Commonwealth states, it was not so easy for us to pinpoint any issues in countries, because we wouldn't have any representation there. We could do that, I suppose, leaning on the knowledge which came to us through the EU, but in general terms, whenever there was an issue, the issue was raised by the Secretariat, so it was always on the agenda.

SO: Michael, did it involve you travelling to support the Secretary General's 'good offices' role? As Malta between 2005 and 2007 acted as Chair-in-Office, you had a particular responsibility on CMAG?

MF: Well, we were also chairing CMAG between 2005 and 2007, so I did travel. I travelled to Pakistan and I travelled to Fiji at the request and by agreement of CMAG. So, as Chair of CMAG, part of the work of CMAG is complementary to what the SG does, but in full conjunction with the Secretariat: not in some sort of competitive role, and also with the support of the Secretariat. For example, when I went to Pakistan, a member of the Secretariat who was following the situation [also] came to Pakistan. She did not attend the meeting with Musharraf, but she came to give us support, and to give me support and information – to be there with the delegation. Similarly, when I went to Fiji...

SO: Please, if I could just ask you about the trip to Pakistan...?

MF: Yes.

SO: How did you approach this particular issue in terms of diplomacy, or the particular line of argument you used with General Musharraf?

MF: Well, the first important thing was getting the meeting with Musharraf. I did not request the meeting with Musharraf on his own. What we did – and this was very much in line in discussions with the Secretariat – was that I asked for a bilateral meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, so this was a bilateral Malta-Pakistan meeting. Then I asked that, after the meeting, I would be given a meeting with the President to discuss the Commonwealth [and] the CMAG issue. That's exactly what happened. When we had the meeting with President Musharraf, there were only three people present: President Musharraf, myself and his Foreign Minister. There were no note takers. President Musharraf received me wearing his uniform, which I thought was a little bit rich, I suppose. *[Laughter]*

SO: Since that was the cause of the problem! *[Laughter]*

MF: And so I decided to pay him back for it, and I said, "Thank you very much, Mr President, for the meeting. As you know, the subject of the meeting is what you're wearing," to which, I have to say, he smiled. He was very charming

throughout the whole meeting. President Musharraf had made many promises to us at that stage, [saying] that he will take off his uniform, setting his own deadline. That deadline, I suspect, had not been reached yet but was about to be reached: it was close. So, in a way, I was there to reinforce that there was a date – which he had given us himself, by the way. The last deadline which CMAG set for Musharraf [was] to remove his uniform, therefore no longer remaining the Executive Chief, etc.... I mean, the uniform is a symbol. [The deadline] had been set by Musharraf himself. He said, “I will do it by...” So, that was taken over by CMAG and said, “Fine, as long as you do it by this time.” There was a general reluctance to destabilise or create anything which might destabilise Pakistan – understandably so, because Pakistan was and remains at the forefront of the fight against terrorism: against the Taliban and the issue of Afghanistan. There was a reluctance, I would say, among most members.

SO: I was going to say, given their role within the coalition in Afghanistan, there was the particular importance of Pakistan as a point of destabilisation for the Blair/Brown Government.

MF: And the UK and Canada were in CMAG at the time. They were members of CMAG.

SO: Were you also receiving any indications of serious concern from the Americans about the potential destabilisation of General Musharraf’s position?

MF: Not directly, no. Not directly. I would think they would have done that through the UK. [Laughter] But I never received anything directly from the Americans. What was interesting is that we did our very best, and we were playing around with the credibility of the Commonwealth to some extent because one of the underlying motives was that we did not want – and I discussed this many times with Don McKinnon, and it was his concern as well, I’m sure he can confirm that...

SO: He’s already alluded to this.

MF: ...[we did not want] the Commonwealth seen as having been hard with the Africans and soft with the Asians.

SO: I asked him that exact question.

MF: There was a sensitivity, and my going to Pakistan was to do the bilateral meeting, which was needed, but much more of an excuse for us to actually do the Commonwealth part, [Laughter] and to do it softly, because in that way Pakistan would not feel that I went there as CMAG to tell the President to take off his uniform. But I went there on a bilateral mission, so it was soft diplomacy – softest of the soft – [Laughter] and then on the margins of my bilateral meeting, I had a meeting with him on the CMAG issue. That’s how we worked it out.

SO: ‘Constructive engagement’ [Laughter] is the phrase that the Americans used with a similar approach towards Southern Africa.

MF: We left it [at] that. He was committed to removing his uniform by the deadline, if I remember correctly, and that was that.

SO: Did you meet with other elements in Pakistan?

MF: I met the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the President. But I engaged with the President directly on this issue, not with the others. What happened then was that Musharraf lost it, to some extent, and as you've just mentioned, he got a state of emergency, he suspended the constitution – just about everything. We called an urgent meeting of CMAG. There was still a reluctance... I could still feel a reluctance from the UK and from Canada to suspend Pakistan at this stage. We had a five to six hour meeting trying to achieve... Pakistan was being strongly defended by Sri Lanka, and, to some extent, also by Malaysia, but not so strongly. It was more Sri Lanka that was making the case for Pakistan.

SO: Why, because of regional solidarity?

MF: I think so. And they'd reached out to the Sri Lankans to try to help them with the confrontation. Mark Malloch Brown was representing the UK [at the meeting]; it might be interesting to ask for his views that. The consensus we managed to achieve – and I had to negotiate very hard and long hours for that – was that we would suspend Pakistan if Pakistan did not do one, two, three [things] by the time we met again in Kampala, which was, I think, a month away – a month or two away. So, if you are to understand how that worked out, you have to see two declarations of CMAG: the one in London and the one in Kampala. When we met in Kampala...

SO: The CHOGM convened on 23rd November, 2007.

MF: Yes. When we met in Kampala, I used a tactic because I felt that now we really had the credibility of the Commonwealth at stake. It was my firm belief that we had to suspend Pakistan or CMAG would become a charade, and the Commonwealth would lose a lot of credibility. It was also the strong feeling of Don McKinnon. So, what I did was, I knew there was one paragraph on suspension. I got a discussion on all the other paragraphs except that paragraph. We discussed them for a very long time, and Sri Lanka was making amendments to every one of them and we went through all of them. And then there was one section – one other paragraph, which was not the paragraph of suspension – which stated that although there has been progress, the conditions laid down in our London declaration had substantially not been met by Pakistan. There was a huge discussion on that, lasting many hours, and finally Sri Lanka wanted to put a positive angle [on it] – which was again admitting that there was progress – and then accepting that the progress was not enough, and that this substantially did not meet with the requirements of London. I got a consensus on that section. I then came to my final paragraph of suspension, and Mark Malloch Brown said, "Well, Mr Chairman, now we need to find consensus on this paragraph on suspension." I said, "Excuse me, Mark, but actually it's the other way around. I will only accept not suspending Pakistan if there is a consensus not to suspend. I don't need a consensus to suspend, because if you look at the London declaration we said we would suspend if Pakistan do not meet our conditions. We now have agreed that the conditions have not been met – there's consensus

around the table – and so I will only accept the situation of no suspension if we now have a full consensus not to suspend.”

SO: Adept diplomacy! And argued like a lawyer.

MF: I was absolutely on the right side. We had the press conference at two o'clock in the morning, and all the ministers were there – including the minister from Sri Lanka – saying that this is the decision that's been taken. I think we defended the credibility of the Commonwealth by doing that. There was a hullabaloo the next day. The Prime Minister of Sri Lanka was livid with his Minister of Foreign Affairs. I was taken to task by, of all people, the President of Ghana when I was reporting as Chairman of CMAG to the heads as to why on earth we took upon ourselves the decision to suspend.

SO: When it should have been the heads that made the decision?

MF: He said, “You should have recommended it to us, and then we should have made the decision because we are here.” [But] it had been very clearly established for a very long time that that decision would be taken by CMAG. And, in fact, Don McKinnon had told me, “I am completely sure that the heads will be very happy to have that decision taken by CMAG, because then they can say it's not theirs.” But that was not the case. I was taken to task by the President of Ghana, who might have had another reason to do that.

SO: I was going to say. There would be an agenda there.

MF: So, in any case, we did the right thing, I think, for the Commonwealth. I have to say, after the meeting of London, the decision to suspend Pakistan if they don't meet our requirements was item one on *Al-Jazeera*, item one on *BBC News* and *BBC World*, and item one on *CNN*. I was actually interviewed live on all those news bulletins in London, which shows that although the Commonwealth is a soft power, if it uses the soft power in the right way it can also influence international opinion. I think we underplay this very often. My experience of CMAG was exactly the opposite: that it does have a lot of influence on international affairs if it wants to.

SO: If I could go back to Fiji. You have indicated that Fiji was very much part of your concerns between 2005 and 2006.

MF: That was easy. Fiji was easy.

SO: In what way?

MF: Fiji was a coup d'état. So, what do you in a coup d'état? [*Laughter*]

SO: As you say, CMAG's remit had emerged from the Millbrook Declaration of 1995 to deal with military overthrows.

MF: Fiji was outright. Fiji had to be suspended. The issue was how we were going to do it, and how we were going to coordinate, and that was a very valid point raised by Don McKinnon. I think the Commonwealth did a great job there of coordinating the Commonwealth's actions with that of the Pacific Islands Forum, with that of the UN, and with that of the EU. So, there was a

coordination of our work with those three institutions to try and be as effective as possible.

SO: Was that you as Chair of CMAG doing this coordinating?

MF: No, that was the Secretariat, but CMAG was obviously also conscious of that. I went [and] I asked to speak to Commodore Bainimarama and he accepted. He received me. He was critical of CMAG – they were making his life more difficult, and making it more difficult for him – rather than understanding that he needs to go back to democracy. Again, I suppose he paid lip service to the fact that he was going to adopt a new constitution and that this was a transitory position. When we were there, we also met with members from the opposition groupings. It was a bit of a hopeless task, actually, with him. It was a bit of a hopeless task. In that meeting, he was very courteous, but he was not really willing to engage on anything in particular.

So, he courteously saw me, but I don't think we had much effect on him. [Laughter] And, in fact, as you can see, Fiji's lost to some extent. We were looking, at the time, at whether we could also engage with the 'Elders' in Fiji, who had some sort of influence, but we did not – at least I did not go with CMAG. As far as I'm aware – I don't follow the Fiji situation very much – we're still in the same boat, no?

SO: They are due to hold elections this year, by September 2014, under a new constitution.

On the question of Uganda, obviously there was growing domestic opposition to President Museveni's rule and yet Kampala was the designated next venue for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Did that complicate your particular role on CMAG? I know that there were issues concerning President Museveni's resistance to the reintroduction of plural politics; there were questions of Human Rights violations, etc. Was that ever officially a concern of yours?

MF: Yes. Uganda was on the agenda. I'm not sure whether that was formally on the agenda or not. There was the issue of the re-election. There was an issue of whether presidential terms there should be two times or three times, which needed a change in the constitution. There were issues about the stifling of the opposition, and I think we had got to the point where the good offices of the SG were being used there.

We didn't really have much of an argument about extending the two terms to more than two terms, quite frankly. It was at the same time when France changed its constitution to allow the president to run for more than two terms. So, legally it was a very difficult issue to raise, but I know that Don McKinnon was very much engaged on the issues of Human Rights and Civil Society.

SO: So, as Chair of CMAG you were not acting in tandem to the SG's good offices to try and alleviate the situation?

MF: No, I was not really engaged as Chair. It had not reached that stage. The only two countries that were really engaged in the CMAG were Fiji and Pakistan, and the most difficult one was Pakistan.

SO: Could I ask you, please, about your candidacy for the SG position?

MF: Yes, of course. *[Laughter]*

SO: When did you first actively consider putting your name forward?

MF: I have to say that it fitted in with what I wanted to do at that stage in my life, which is [that] I wanted to dedicate a portion of my life to development work, and I thought the Commonwealth was a huge opportunity for development. I also could see that, with the Malaysian candidacy, we could take on the fight. I spoke to friends of mine in the Indian Cabinet to check whether India would have a candidate. Particularly, I spoke to Kamal Nath, who then spoke to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who came back with the answer that they will not have a candidate. *[Laughter]* I spoke with my Prime Minister who said, "We'll support you if you go for this." Cyprus was very enthusiastically supporting. We decided to put [forward] the candidature. As things then turned out, through the influence of Sonia Gandhi, India did have a candidate, but by the time that came through I had already started my campaign. I had already made a commitment with my own electorate in Malta, and I basically decided that the only honourable death was death in battle. We were getting very positive responses from the Caribbean, which actually retained a certain solidity of front in terms of my candidature, even up to the voting, as far as I know – excluding Trinidad, which had an Indian presence, and Guyana, which had an Indian presence. So, we could not get a full...

SO: Now, is that the factor of the 'wider Indian world' within the Commonwealth?

MF: Yes, of course. So, we could not get a full endorsement by CARICOM, but excluding those two, I think we had the support of the island states. I was putting my candidature to them as a candidature of the island states within the Commonwealth. Obviously, I was going to do that. We immediately had signs from Britain that they were not really supportive of our candidature, particularly when the Indian candidature then came on board. The Canadians were a bit non-committal. But we were also putting across the argument that having an SG from a country that is also a member of the EU would be tremendously beneficial for the Commonwealth, particularly as we are also putting the case that I was the only politician throwing my hat in the ring and that therefore we needed a politician to give political direction and vision to the Commonwealth. That was, to my mind, directly opposite of what the British were looking for.

Asia was a bit difficult to consider. I lobbied the Pacific, but in the Pacific, of course, you also have an Indian presence. We lobbied the Pacific states: some were more receptive than others. Samoa was more receptive than others; Tonga was not receptive at all. In fact, they actually told me they could not hold the bilateral meeting which was near the time there was the Pacific Islands Forum there. So, I visited as a tourist, but eventually I got admitted to the Pacific Islands Forum through our own contacts. The head of the household of the King, actually, was a graduate of the University of Malta, *[Laughter]* so we had other ways of getting there! *[Laughter]* It was a big fight, we gave a big fight. I got a lot of support from the Foreign Minister of South Africa...

SO: Did you? That's interesting.

MF: ...who is now the President of the Commission of the African Union. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. She, I think, had got Mbeki to support me, and with Mbeki came the SADC. So, the fight, really, was to try and get African support. Who gets African support in the end was going to win.

I had support from Tanzania, or at least sympathy from Tanzania, because the Foreign Minister was on CMAG and could see how we were operating CMAG. I think the fairness issue was also an issue for them. In the end, however, Mbeki changed his vote. After the Queen's Dinner, which was the day before the vote, Mbeki looked up our Prime Minister and told him he was going to support Malta, support my candidature. I am informed that there was a meeting after that dinner between Manmohan Singh and Mbeki – very late at night [or in the] early hours of the morning – and that actually resulted in Mbeki changing his vote, and, with Mbeki, SADC.

What was interesting was that, after we lost, an official from the British delegation – unfortunately, I don't know him and I don't know his name – came to my group as we were sitting down outside and said, "I know it's the wrong time, but I just had to tell you that we did not expect you to give us such a good fight." [Laughter]

I then went back to Malta. This was November 2007 [and] we had elections in March 2008. To a large extent, my decision to run for SG in the Commonwealth cost me my seat, because then people thought, "Why should we vote for this guy if this guy wants to go somewhere else?" There wasn't enough time between November and March...

SO: To ramp up your political campaign at home, no.

MF: So, I actually lost my seat in 2008. I regained it a bit later through a bi-election, but there you are. I learned a lot in the process, and I think we exponentially increased Malta's exposure in the Commonwealth.

SO: Undoubtedly so.

MF: And there you are; that's how it works.

SO: Politics is a brutal business.

MF: [Laughter] It's part of the game. But I tried. We were trying to ambush – to get a surprise result – and we were very, very close to that. We were very close to that, because the Indians were in a panic on the last day. They were really in a panic. And I was interviewed by David Frost – now, I don't know why he interviewed me, but he interviewed me – on *Frost Over the World*. You can [find it on YouTube](#). His last question to me was, "I understand that you might be the next SG of the Commonwealth. From my soundings, I understand that you are likely to be – that you might be." And my answer to that was, "That depends to whom you have been speaking." So, maybe he got that fear as well. I wouldn't like to think it was an attempt to get me out of the reception which was going on at the time! [Laughter]

SO: Oh, no. I don't take conspiracy theories quite that far!

MF: *[Laughter]* I wouldn't take conspiracy theories that far. I think it was a genuine thing. It just happened a bit at the wrong time for me, because there was...I went back to the reception after that, but...

There was a feeling...The expression is, I suppose, being a bit of a 'surprise result'. That's what we were trying to achieve: getting in under the radar.

SO: It would have been a coup by small islands states. Not a coup d'état, obviously! But a political coup.

MF: It would have been a political coup by the small islands states, but people are influenced by other prospects.

SO: When you mentioned that meeting between Manmohan Singh and Mbeki, I was thinking immediately about whether there were other fora influencing their decisions – such as IBSA Dialogue Forum, possibly, or South Africa trying to become a BRIC, or whether it was just the bilateral relationship...

MF: South Africa is a BRIC. And South Africa has a huge Indian population, and South Africa was facing an election.

SO: Cynics, I am afraid, describe it as a 'little s' in BRICs!

MF: It's an S in the BRICS. *[Laughter]*

SO: It is an 's', BRICs, but that is a little 's'!

MF: But it has also an Indian population, since the time of Mahatma Gandhi, and it was facing an election. So, these are things which can happen. You know, I had the Foreign Minister of Australia telling me in Tonga [that], "There is no doubt in our mind that you are the candidate that we should support, but we're supporting India." *[Laughter]*

SO: That's precious little consolation. *[Laughter]* Absolutely no consolation at all! But, Michael, thank you very much indeed for giving that important personal view of what was a critical election, with the benefit of hindsight.

Please, can I just ask you a concluding question about the Queen and her contribution? What are your particular observations on the role of the Headship, the personality of HM the Queen, and what do you feel this says about the Commonwealth going forward?

MF: The Queen is a professional. She's not just a monarch, she's a professional. I have seen her operate in a group where she works the crowd like any seasoned politician. She carries a lot of charm and prestige. I will repeat what I said at the meeting in Cambridge, that I cannot understand why the presence of the Queen as the head of the Commonwealth can, in any way, influence the position or status of the SG. I don't think any SG is cowed by the fact that there's a Queen as head of the Commonwealth. The issue is whether heads want to retain the British monarch as the head of the Commonwealth.

In a way, it's whether they want to keep this tradition. I mean, the Commonwealth really has developed out of the former colonies of the British Empire, so why should this be something that's going to be hidden in some way? Okay, I believe it should be developing further as a development organisation – it should go beyond that – but I think it has gone beyond that. I don't think it's a major issue, and I don't think it should be made into a major issue. There have been discussions on whether the head of the Commonwealth should be elected from among the leaders of the Commonwealth. Many people mentioned the example of Mandela as possibly having been a great head of the Commonwealth, but when you read the literature, the comment is that if people mention Mandela then they cannot mention anyone else! [Laughter] I think that's quite right, actually.

So, I think if there's going to be a headship, I see no particular reason why that should change. I think there's consensus on the Queen. Whether they'll be consensus on Prince Charles, I think, depends on how he tackles the issue. I see no reason why not.

SO: How did you observe the role of royal hospitality at the Valletta CHOGM in 2005? Did it help to ease any particular tensions? Did it provide an additional reinforcement to the importance of Valletta being the chosen venue?

MF: I'm not sure whether this is something which is crucial to the Commonwealth, but whenever there is an aspect of royal hospitality, it's normally a unifying moment around the person of the Queen – who, in any case, is a non-executive head of state. So, it's a titular head of state and she's a titular head of the Commonwealth: she has really no decision-making in the Commonwealth or in the processes of the Commonwealth. Many of the Commonwealth states are republics. The only other alternative might be just to remove the title of head of Commonwealth altogether, but why should we give up a bit of tradition? I think it's a bit of tradition. It requires a head of the Commonwealth. It requires an SG of the Commonwealth to be a forceful character with the international press, because one thing the headship of the Queen does with the international press is that they concentrate on it as if the Commonwealth consists of the headship of the Queen and the rest of it. But, to give one example of somebody who is not in office, I don't think that Sonny Ramphal was in any way overshadowed...

SO: No. [Laughter]

MF: ...by the fact that the Queen was head of the Commonwealth. So, it depends on how an SG of the Commonwealth handles the international press. I think the international press also needs to be educated on what the Commonwealth does, and that means that it needs to be taken head on, which is not an easy task, but it's a task which requires some political skill. And so, again, I don't see any reason for change. I think there's a lot that can be said for continuity.

What I do think is important is that this matter is put behind us as early as possible. We don't want this issue to come up when, God forbid [Laughter], The Queen passes away, which is humanly inevitable. And so, I think it is better that planning takes place in a calm way and in a decisive way, and an

opening of this discussion could take place at the next CHOGM in Malta, actually. An opening of discussion: not necessarily a closure of the discussion, but maybe the point should be mooted. "What do we think about the Head of the Commonwealth? Let's have an exchange, a frank exchange of views, to see what the feeling is." I think it might be useful.

SO: I have to say, there's quite a bit riding on that next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in your country. [Laughter]

MF: Looks like it! [Laughter]

SO: Michael, thank you very much.

MF: There is one more thing I would like to add. The Commonwealth must leave space for informality among the heads of Government.

SO: The question of the Retreat.

MF: The general feeling of why CHOGM takes place, the Retreat is part of it, but particularly, the Retreat... The more we formalise the Retreat, the more we may lose the value of the Retreat.

SO: In 2005, it was also a conscious decision by Malta to have a longer Retreat.

MF: Yes, and I think [heads] should be together, and it should give space to prime ministers from smaller states who would not have the opportunity to engage with a major G8 leader, [or] a prime minister from a BRIC or BRICS, a country of BRICS, to engage and to even strike a personal relationship and a friendship. Because that is the huge value which smaller states gain from the Commonwealth. The moment you formalise this, it becomes like the UN.

SO: I was going to say, like another international organisation.

MF: It's what you don't want. It has to be the family of nations; it has to be the family of the Commonwealth.

SO: Yes.

MF: The concept of family is quite important. In a certain way, the Queen, being a mother, is a little bit of a mother [Laughter] of the Commonwealth. Well, it has a little bit of that touch, but that's not the reason why it's the family of the Commonwealth. It has to be a family of the Commonwealth – the sense of family among the heads of government.

SO: Did you get into the Retreat? Did you attend the Retreat in Valetta?

MF: No. I think that's right, though. I feel the Retreat should be for heads only; that's why it's a Retreat. But it should be more informal, and they should have more time together. They should have more time to interact: to chat, to meet each other, to even raise bilateral issues with each other, if they need to. That is the concept of putting them altogether, and that is what adds value to that. If it becomes a meeting with very formal agendas, the very formal approach, I think you kill the whole spirit of it.

SO: Yes, okay. Thank you very much.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]