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Key:

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PM: This is Philip Murphy interviewing Ambassador Haidar on 14 June 2013 in Delhi. Thank you very much for speaking to us Ambassador Haidar. Can I take you back to the beginning of your career, your time at university, in Cambridge? When and in what way did you become aware of the Commonwealth as an institution and Commonwealth organisations, maybe even before you began as a diplomat?

SH: Not particularly, except that as a student in India I recall that this debate of whether India should be in the Commonwealth or not was quite active and – these were Nehru’s days - and we hung on every word that he had to say at that time. The way he shaped the country and shaped our consciousness and the way we looked at the world was quite notable, and anyone who’s been through that time would record it. At that time Nehru’s decision to remain in the Commonwealth was something that one was aware of, but the finer points of the discussion were not something that was within our ken as young students in Delhi. But that’s as far as it went.

PM: And one of your postings as a fairly junior diplomat was to London in the 1960s.

SH: That’s right.

PM: Was it the mid-‘60s?

SH: It was 1964. Between 1964 to 1966 I was there.

PM: So at the time of the Indo-Pakistan war.

SH: I think about that time.

PM: Did you have any involvement in the diplomacy around the Indo-Pakistan war, so far as Britain was concerned.

SH: Nothing apart from indignation because that was a time when Prime Minister Wilson made a remark or two that was not at all appreciated in India and still

rankles actually in the histories that are written about that period. But nothing apart from that. The actual shaping of our diplomatic response, rather than following what was going on, was done at a much more elevated level than that of minor functionary as I was at that time.

PM: Let me ask you a broader question about India and the Commonwealth. There is a sense that the Commonwealth, even in Nehru's time, was fairly peripheral to India foreign policy and has become even more peripheral as the years have gone on. Do you think that is a fair assessment?

SH: No, I don't think it is. I think that if Nehru chose to keep India within the Commonwealth, he had a purpose and I think that one should be aware of Britain's own self perception and Britain's own role in the world. The shrinkage of British influence was fairly slow and I think almost a reluctant process to begin with at the time that you're talking about. East of Suez was a very active concept. It was a policy framework for Britain and when Harold Wilson had a few observations to make on East of Suez because he recognised quite clearly that Britain's commitment and the kind of role that it had assumed earlier could no longer be sustained. That was something that was happening in London and spreading out into the Commonwealth. Nehru, from what we could understand and what had been discussed here in India, chose to remain within the Commonwealth, partly because it meant that this association with Britain which was still a world power was only gradually, or should we say, done away with in friendly way. I think that he felt that to maintain lines of communication was important. It was important for India and not only for India that it also meant that the Commonwealth could take on the role that it did take on in those early days, which was that of liberation, of promoting national liberation instead of being a kind of break in that. So I think that was a very important part of it.

PM: That's a very interesting point. So Nehru wouldn't have seen any sort of contradiction between belonging to the Non-Aligned Movement and belonging to the Commonwealth.

SH: No, I don't think there was any contradiction at all. Remember there was no Non-Aligned Movement as such. There was non-alignment which came before the Movement and the Movement was 1963, I suppose, when the first Non-Aligned conference took place in Belgrade. Non-alignment was an attitude and there was the Neutral Nations Relations Repatriation Committee in Korea and all that. The 'non-aligned rule' was important in the world, I think, and especially at the UN earlier. Nehru, in fact from what I recall from that time, was temperamentally against joining up in movements as such: because he felt that it was important that an independence of judgment should be maintained by a country as large as India and as potentially significant, and because he felt that India's role in the world could not be subsumed in any kind of movement. We were not aligned; we had our own views and we felt that we had our own contribution to make.

PM: But presumably there was more of a contradiction between Commonwealth membership and India's very close relationship with the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s.

SH: You know, it's a very curious thing, I don't think there was any real problem on that because there were no pressures within the Commonwealth to

conform to a Western position, except in matters like democracy. The question of democracy also and colonialism is interesting because when the Soviet Union was crumbling - I don't know if you recall, but there was a move at some stage, I think possibly it was one of the times that I was posted in London. Soviet diplomats at that time, were talking about simply wanting to see the constitution of the Commonwealth.

PM: Yes.

SH: Because they wanted to see what was the glue? What was it that kept these countries in some kind of relationship with each other - an amicable relationship? What are the common factors? And so the constitution was something that they would be interested in. Of course there is no constitution. There are communiqués, that's about all. So that didn't take us very far, but it was an interesting little footnote, as it were, to the Soviet interest or relationship with the Commonwealth.

PM: But this is interesting. When in the 1990s Soviet diplomats came to you and said: "Well what is that binds the Commonwealth together, because there isn't very much of practical value left?" How did you explain it to them?

SH: Well, fortunately by then there was a very active Commonwealth Secretariat, so we said "Go and ask them", so far as we are concerned, just like Britain doesn't have a written constitution. It does have a constitution, it's not the kind of lawless state which makes things up as it goes along, of course. But there's no written constitution of the type that other countries have. So the Commonwealth has, perhaps, borrowing from that model, which is very central to the Commonwealth experience. It felt that to put things down in a formalised way would invite dissent and might be very difficult to do, would bring strains within the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth nearly broke up on the issue of South Africa. I don't know if it nearly broke up, maybe it did or didn't, but certainly many were disinclined to have anything to do with an organisation that had room for South Africa, for an apartheid regime. So they were forced to leave, of course they were able to say that they had voluntarily withdrawn, but actually they were kicked out.

PM: Yes.

SH: And that was the kind of thing that was very important for India. It was an important part of our policy as we emerged as an independent country and the Commonwealth was close to those purposes. It hadn't been originally because there was the white Commonwealth, there were the four countries of the Commonwealth, the original ones and even until then felt that they...I mean, in the post war world, there was an inner Commonwealth, in a sense, and that when India remained in the Commonwealth, so changed the balance and we thought for the better. We felt that it helped causes to which we were committed anyway and number one among these causes - maybe not number one, but certainly somewhere near the top because the other one was liberation, national liberation of colonised countries. But apartheid was poison, and had to be opposed and had to be got rid of.

PM: You were in Mrs Gandhi's private office in the mid-1970s.

SH: That's correct.

PM: What was her approach to the Commonwealth?

SH: I think she liked it. But I want to say one thing before, if I may. When I went to London in the mid-1960s the Commonwealth Secretariat had taken shape. It had been established, it had the magnificent house which it continues to occupy, but the reluctance to institutionalise, which is part of the Commonwealth way of doing things. Of course you have to work; we've drawn quite a bit from the initial sort of reluctance, firstly to have a secretariat at all, then to have anything more than a very minimal sort of secretariat. So when I was there that time, I recall when Commonwealth meetings took place they used to borrow officials from the Commonwealth embassies, from the embassies to take notes and all that. I was given this job once when Escott Reid was the Canadian representative for some meeting. I forget what the meeting was and I was sent off by my Deputy High Commissioner, to take notes. So I took these notes and I came back and I showed them to my boss and he said: "The important thing is to make the first draft". That the best lesson I've ever learnt, I've never forgotten. So we did that, but this is an indication of how the Commonwealth did not really wish to institutionalise itself beyond a point and to develop a structure, a secretariat structure, and prefer to sort of fish around and get a few people; but of course the pressure is in the other direction, but ultimately a lot stronger. It was Britain that had to pay for much of it and perhaps there's a certain advantage in the Commonwealth evolving in that situation.

PM: In your various postings in London you must've seen the Secretariat change in character over the years from the 1960s, and then 1980s, and then in the 1990s.

SH: Yes, I think that...let me add one little bit. Which is that when I had my first posting ever was in Cairo and then a practice in those days that once a week or month or every month the Commonwealth Heads of Mission would meet in someone's embassy and have a nice cup of tea or something and a little bit of a chat; it felt fairly profound but in fact it was just more social than anything else at that occasion. But these were the kind of little elements which were intended to keep a togetherness and to keep a particular spirit alive in the Commonwealth.

PM: Please could you comment on the changing nature of the Commonwealth Secretariat?

SH: As I told you that there was very little to begin with. I even forget the names of the first two, of the earliest Secretary Generals.

PM: Arnold Smith, the Canadian.

SH: Arnold Smith, the Canadian.

PM: And then it was Sonny Ramphal who was there for a long time.

SH: Arnold Smith was a very able man and he was much more of a kind of conventional diplomat of that sort of old Commonwealth persuasion: that sort of person, who contributed a great deal to making the structure without being petty-fogging in the way he set it up. I think at that stage the British Foreign office had a great deal to do with - because it was paying - with the size of the

Secretariat, the levels of the people and it was evolving, but it wasn't really that significant. With Sonny Ramphal, there was a big change. Sonny Ramphal, to my mind, was, is happily one of the most outstanding diplomats of that era and he had a rather limited home-base in a way: in Guyana, I mean. He was bigger than his country in some ways. His vision and his capacity was quite remarkable and he gave the Commonwealth a direction and a purpose which I think sustained it for a generation and he then found things for the Commonwealth to do. By that time apartheid [South African membership] was over and done with by the time he took over...what he did succeed in doing for one thing was he made the Commonwealth a part of international diplomacy. He did this by being very active in the UN for one thing and by being aware of the issues that were being discussed at the UN. There was this famous saying, was it by Harold Macmillan, the other Harold, who tried to invent a post-war role for Britain saying that Britain would be Greece to the United States, Rome yes.

Now I think that Sonny, without using the same language, did something of that sort for the Commonwealth. The issues that were coming before - development issues, in particular - before the world, before the United Nations, were discussed more intimately and, in some ways, more expertly because of the quality of the people who came there and who were drawn in and also because it was a smaller, tighter body. They discussed, and important and useful conclusions were reached in the Commonwealth. For example, the New International Economic Order which kept the UN busy for a while. When I was at the UN I found that I talked about nothing else except the NIEO because that was my job and my task. But it had a certain momentum, but this concept came out of the Commonwealth. The notion of, I think it was the Commonwealth came up with the development aid target of one per cent. It was whittled down to 0.7 ultimately - but these were important international markers and they had a kind of strength or should we say acceptability; certainly something that had to be taken seriously because it carried many countries with them. I think this was one of the things that [were achieved] through intelligence; I don't mean the kind of intelligence that you're reading about in the papers these days. But through just quick wittedness, being clever, being alert and aware and having confidence and the ability to address important issues, Mr Ramphal, Sonny was wonderful in the way in which he made this in to a kind of power house, an intellectual power house and explored new areas.

For example, he invented something called 'an island developing country'. Nobody had ever heard of it. But within the Commonwealth there are plenty of island developing countries, especially in the Caribbean where Sonny Ramphal comes from and to make a special case for them - and this is something that what he was going to do to expand the idea, that globally there were problems that remained neglected because they were just not substantial enough. But the Commonwealth was able to do something very, very useful I think in terms of focusing attention on certain special cases and now making them part of the international discourse. I don't know whether Sonny Ramphal had anything to do with the 'least developed country' concept; maybe he did. But he would not have, I think, pushed for it in the spirit in which many of developed countries did because he used it as a divisive tactic when they were being troubled, NIU concepts by the G77, by groups of developing countries. So they said, "You are developing countries, but some of you are more developing than others." So it was a kind of "split-ist" manoeuvre, to use Soviet terminology. But I don't think Sonny Ramphal

had that intention, but he did in his own inimitable style, focus attention in a very positive way on real issues.

PM: And then how did Emeka Anyaouku compare with Ramphal?

SH: Emeka, I liked very much and he liked me also. He offered me a job actually. But I couldn't go at that time. I thought that he had many advantages; one very important one was that he was an African. We needed, the Commonwealth needed someone from that continent; the largest number of members came from there. The biggest issues, I won't say 'problems', things that could be done constructively, were identified in Africa. Emeka was a man of, I would say, a lot of dignity. He didn't have the flair that Sonny had, because I think without Sonny, the Commonwealth might've crumbled away. Of course, it wouldn't have had any purpose other than fighting the British Foreign Office. Well, not fighting them at least trying to remove and deal with them. It may not have had its own singular and distinctive vision of the world. The Commonwealth, let's not forget, that even at the time of Arnold Smith, the British influence was very strong in the Commonwealth. With Sonny a different dimension, a different sort of influence came. So when Emeka came that pioneering work that, you know, some important stages in the evolution of the Commonwealth had already taken place. What he then had to do was consolidate, to develop it further and keep things going really, essentially which he did very well I think.

PM: And the Commonwealth was changing, you had –

SH: But let me also add that I really didn't have much to do with the Commonwealth by then because I wasn't in London. I was in Delhi at that time where Commonwealth issues by then were not reverberating that loud.

PM: What about your time as High Commissioner? You became High Commissioner –

SH: I was High Commissioner for very, very briefly, because I was Deputy High Commissioner for several years. At that time I attended many meetings in London and actually it's at that time that I saw the dynamics of what Sonny was doing and I got to Emeka at that time. He was the Deputy then and in those days, remember, the Deputy had to be elected, not appointed. Emeka was elected Deputy and was a man of stature with immense dignity. I really admire him as a human being and a positive approach to things. That's how I saw some of the personalities at work. I got to know Sonny Ramphal quite well and, of course, my dear, dear friend, Moni [Malhoutra], was right at the heart of the Commonwealth Secretariat at that time.

PM: Was that helpful to have someone –

SH: Very helpful, for the Commonwealth to have a close link with India and for India to have this link with the Commonwealth. Mark you, by then for India the stakes had changed significantly and actually one thing that I remember and it gives an idea of how India's interests had changed. To begin with, we were involved in this great, which I tried to describe, process of decolonisation and actually apartheid issues and development, all that was there. Pakistan in a huff had walked out and when they tried to get back in, some years later, because for whatever reason, then the fact that the Secretariat was very sensitive to Indian opinion and was not really that concerned about smoothing

the path for Pakistan because it did not want differences and difficulties with India, which at that stage, given the state of relations with India and Pakistan or could have been assumed that these differences would arise. But, okay, I think at the time it was valid, but this is not one of the great global issues whether Pakistan should've been in the Commonwealth or gone back in to the Commonwealth. It was also indicative of the fact that the great issues were no longer those that were motivating; or the Commonwealth was not the forum in which these great issues took shape; or if they were not initiated there, they were advanced and taken forward.

PM: Let me take you back to Mrs Gandhi then and her attitude to the Commonwealth. You said it was fairly positive.

SH: Yes, I think so. I think that the one thing, I don't know if she ever went to Commonwealth meetings with her father, possibly not, I don't remember. He used to go very regularly and he obviously found value in these meetings, because they kept him in touch with people, like-minded people. There's a like-mindedness in the Commonwealth: people don't have to talk too much about what brings them together; things do. There is that old club feeling of London, which is derided rightly, but still has a certain reality. So I think that Nehru found value and found that communication easy, I imagine, that people talked to each other. Now that seems to me to be one of the enduring values that I have seen in the Commonwealth thanks to Moni and other friends who were in the Secretariat at that time. I was able to see something that I was not really supposed to see. I was a very young officer which was from the press booths to see the heads talking to each other, and that discussion, I think must've been in Indira Gandhi's time. In Delhi, something happened, I don't know which country as I attended so many of these meetings, either in Mrs Gandhi's staff or posted in London or here in Delhi. But what happened was what one saw was there was a very free exchange. I don't think anything quite like it is found elsewhere on the international scene. People interrupt each other, no "Excellencies", no sort of formalities and, in fact, it was sometimes like a kind of...if that would be a proper parallel, but sometimes the American President goes to a school, house or whatever...[it] will go for him.

I think that in the Commonwealth, the differences of opinion could be fiercely expressed with a tremendous political tinge to it. They weren't just...these were real discussions and Mrs Gandhi didn't always like it because she wasn't used to it and neither were the others used to having people go for them. But she used that as a model once and it failed, totally. The discussions in the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting taking place in Delhi, one of them, were very good and this sort of thing and I think this is something Mrs Gandhi found real value in that; and this, as I said, is a unique forum, nothing quite like it. It, sort of also, helps to bring people closer together, that something that you share if you can get at each other, you share something and it creates a bond of sorts, maybe a bond of dislike. But still something to create links. So Mrs Gandhi who was, at the same time, Head of the Non-Aligned Movement, thought that the idea was accepted that something comparable would be attempted within the UN and a meeting was called at the United Nations because everyone goes there, all the heads: "Please, let's take a day or take half a day and let's have a meal together as we eat and talk." The idea was just have an informal discussion without an agenda and these Heads of Commonwealth meetings don't have an agenda. There's no negotiated agenda, as far as I remember; I think I'm right. They

just get together and talk about issues of current interest. The role of the Secretary General is very important and that was created by Sonny, that he was able to identify issues as he went along and be a participant and not just a Secretary in the discussions, is very important. When the Non-Aligned got together, they didn't have that same...for one thing they'd got language barriers and so interpretation was necessary, that took half of the fun out of it and that if you had to get an interpreter functioning before you go for someone's jugular, it takes a little bit away from it! So actually that turned out to be quite a flop, nothing very much there and it has never been repeated that notion of an informal meeting of them. They need their people, they need a more formalised, something that they're more comfortable [with] which is also understandable.

PM: And then after Mrs Gandhi's death, I get the impression Rajiv Gandhi took quite an active role in the Commonwealth.

SH: He was very interested. Rajiv Gandhi was a very active person in that he did not like to engage in international situations and discussions, just for form sake. If he was there he would try and make a contribution. He went to the Bahamas or somewhere.

PM: Nassau.

SH: Yes, somewhere in the Caribbean. I was there for that period.

PM: That was in 1985. Was that right?

SH: Yes. I was not on his staff or anything, but I think I had some small function role before. But I went there and I saw that he was very much at the centre of activity; and when he was there he was trying to activate this process to make the Commonwealth more significant. It had not withered away, but it had become less prominent. I think that Sonny had been through his great days and I don't know if he was still Secretary General at the time.

PM: Yes, he was.

SH: He was and the world had changed and some way of trying to find new ways of bringing the attention of these important personages to bear and to make an impact globally had to be found, and Rajiv was certainly drawn in to that. But possibly by then, the kind of thing that the Commonwealth had been identified with had lost the centrality that once it unquestionably had. Not that it was unimportant, not at all. But that it wasn't as central to global and individual concerns as it had been earlier.

PM: How did Rajiv Gandhi try and give it a new significance?

SH: I wasn't part of the discussions that Rajiv was interested. Because Moni [Malhoutra] was unwell - he had a bad throat or something - I was sent to do the work that he would've done, which is that of Press Liaison with our own people. I had earlier done the press job in the Ministry of External Affairs, so I was taken just for this. But Moni would be aware of the kind of...the processes, the inner processes that Rajiv was trying to do, why he was going, what his purpose was. He was a very hard driving man, you know. If you had a fortune, good fortune or whatever of working for Rajiv, you were driven hard. But he had a sincerity, he did things because he felt they were worth

doing. I'm not quite sure ... I mean, I don't remember the Nassau meeting that well. I would've been very much on the margins and trying to see what the media people required and looking after them as best I could. I don't remember what the issues were in Nassau. But from Nassau Rajiv went to New York, I think if I'm not mistaken, and from there he went to Moscow. So it gives you an idea of the kind of scale on which he was thinking and where the Commonwealth fitted into his own perceptions. Again, this connection between Commonwealth and UN which Sonny had made very important. I think that was emphasised. But in terms of the issues at that time: structurally it was a kind of revitalisation of things that had been seen in Sonny's time. I'm just guessing really, but I don't remember the issues.

PM: Can I ask you something about the headship of the Commonwealth? The notion of the head of the Commonwealth was created in 1949, of course, as a means of keeping India in the Commonwealth as a republic. Since then it has taken on a life of its own under Elizabeth II. Is the headship significant to the Commonwealth? Could the Commonwealth do without a head, do you think? Or has it been useful?

SH: Well it was useful, obviously, to begin with, to have the British monarch as the head of the Commonwealth, symbolically. It meant that it gave a certain focus, it meant that people were comfortable with the transition in to the new Commonwealth by having Britain and, above all, gave Britain a sense that its reach, its global role was not being discarded and that they were able to maintain that. I think it was important for Britain as much as for the others and these symbols do have their value. The Queen's visits, as part of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, are always looked forward to and she's a very practised Head of Government and head of her country, not Government, Head of State and someone was pointing out that an Indian president, for example, has a term maybe five years, six years and others about five years. She's done something like seven terms.

PM: Yes.

SH: By that measure, so she's very practised and her presence is appreciated. I think these personal factors can't be written out of the...it's not only a question of officials or academics or whatever trying to figure out what is good and what is important and this is something which is very visible in the Commonwealth, that some of the most wilful and determined and expert voices, I don't think those are the big people and that's why the Head of Government meeting when they meet without aides and just talk to each other. They do have some aides, but not passing them slips and all that. They're just sort of there to fetch and carry for them. The actual talking is done by the Heads themselves. The role of the individual is there for all to see and I think this is one thing that is a very useful factor in these Heads of Government meetings and brings them back again and again, because they have a kind of unique setting in which they function and their role is accepted, but I've lost what I was trying to say.

PM: About the Queen.

SH: Yes, so what I was trying to say is that individuals do count in international diplomacy as you know very well. The Queen's role which is one of great dignity and the fact that she's been there forever is important. I think that it is one of the elements that keeps this thing on track.

PM: Can you say a bit about India's relations with the UK, particularly during your time in London in the '80s and '90s? Did you see any changes during that period under the Thatcher/Major and then early Blair government in the relationship?

SH: Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi got on very well - surprisingly - both strong, powerful women. They may very well have pulled in opposite directions, but I think Mrs Thatcher, when she first came here, was Secretary of State for Education, the famous milk snatcher days, yes. As it happened, I was on the deputation from our Ministry of External Affairs to our Ministry of Education. The Minister there had a programme and he wanted someone from MEAs [and] I was sent there. So I was the Liaison Officer for Margaret Thatcher and I spent a week wandering around India with her. It was a very nice visit and I was with her, or at least I escorted her, when she went to see Mrs Gandhi. I think when she went there, Mrs Gandhi was senior to her, in a way. I don't think that Mrs Thatcher accepted that anyone was senior to her in any situation, but there were certain objective factors. One was that they were both women and one shouldn't lose sight of that. They had to fight against the odds and so there was a kind of mutual sympathy in that sense; and also Mrs Gandhi had done everything that Mrs Thatcher aspired to. She had fought her way up, she was the undoubted leader of her country, she had high prestige internationally, and so on and all that. So there was a kind of acceptance on Mrs Thatcher's part of acknowledgment that this was someone senior to her. I mean, someone who had something to offer, had achieved much and has recognition. So I think that that helped in the relationship, in the sense that although neither of them was a sentimental lady and they would make no concessions to anyone for reasons like this, but it did mean that there were certain intangibles at the level of a Head of Government can be useful, can open certain possibilities and I think it did happen. I can't think of specifics unless there...I think it was Mrs Thatcher who needed to keep, was it, Westland...what was that the helicopter company?

PM: Yes, that's right.

SH: Yes and she needed to keep the factory going. I don't remember if it was Mrs Gandhi's time or someone else's time, but Mrs Thatcher needed that...so what did she do? She gave us the helicopters. There was an aid programme in those days; it could be quite substantial, it was very good aid, in that it didn't have to be repeated. It was exactly the sort of aid that the Commonwealth, and from the Commonwealth through the UN, that the demand had been raised by the Group of 77 and other developing countries, that aid should not be a burden to us. Repayment terms should be sensitive to our needs and British aid has always been like that, has been one of the best and that much of it was grant and all that. So at that time Mrs Thatcher gave us helicopters, we didn't particularly want them, because this was the kind of "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts". So this was a gift that cost us, but it was a favour in a way and it kept the factory going. It wasn't totally useless for us and these were a few odd things. The relationship, I would say was not entirely trouble free, but it was a very good relationship. I think that the negatives that I remembered are the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. At that stage Britain's role was a more active one also in the defence area. In 1965 one of the things that happened which kept India very indignant was that Britain intervened not to supply any arms which had been...it followed that policy. This included not returning certain pieces of equipment for our aircraft carrier

which we had bought from Britain at vast expense and had sent for servicing. I think there were some gear for the aircraft when they landed and this created much indignation. "This is our stuff. Why are you holding onto it?" Something like this. Anyway, this was the kind of thing that happened then. There could be moments of high indignation, but on the other hand when India was really in need like, for example, in our confrontation, our war with China, British support was there. So the relationship, as I've said, was not trouble free, but I think it did not create problems for either side. It was basically a relationship with some problems that cropped up every now and then. It was quite a reasonable one. One exception that I can remember which is that an insurgency developed in Punjab and this was given a lot of support from the Sikh community or certain elements among the Sikh community in the UK and we used to demand - this was in Rajiv Gandhi's time actually - that something should be done about it. Mrs Gandhi had been assassinated. To begin with, the British response was a rather lukewarm one, saying that - you know - "these are British citizens. They live here, they're not breaking the law. What can we do?" And we demanded more. I think eventually at that stage British sensitivity to a terrorist situation, in a way terrorism was being promoted out of Britain, was not as sensitive as it might have been and in a sense it was not something that was affecting them. That's the way India looked at it and therefore they were much too relaxed about it. But I think they got the message and the cooperation was very carefully done and not publicised between the security agencies. [It] developed and became very useful and became a useful way of actually acting against people who were up to no good.

PM: And can I just take you forwards to your brief time as High Commissioner. This followed a rather ill-fated visit by the Queen in 1997 when Robin Cook had rather blundered into the issue of Kashmir. Was there a perception that Britain's relations with India had been damaged by that in any sense?

SH: Yes, of course. We love denouncing Britain and often there are things denounce. Britain has its own way of responding, not in quite the same terms, but I think that...I always felt that the relationship was sufficiently grounded. It could take certain strains and what Mr Cook had to say was...I don't know why he said it...but it wasn't well received at all. But as you can see, there was no lasting damage done.

PM: Overall, what would you say was the achievements of the Commonwealth in the last 50 years?

SH: Well, let me say - to use perhaps an inappropriate word, it's been a civilising factor. It has helped to combat some of the great evils of the world - colonialism, apartheid, poverty, exploitation - and it has done this through consensus, not through brutality. I think it has not always successfully promoted democracy, but it has been on the side of democracy. It has kept that notion of rule by acceptance of the people, before the Commonwealth, before itself and has not contested it. In fact, it has done what it can to strengthen it. There are a few things that I can think of which seem to me to be admirable. I think that what the original founders of the new Commonwealth had hoped for has, in fact, been done. What I ask myself today is that how much more? On that, I have no answer.

PM: But do you think it does have a role to play in the future or do you think really the big issues are behind it now.

SH: I think the big issues are behind it. I think that a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, as I said, these are occasions which the Heads of Government enjoy, because they enjoy and they share without inhibition. I mean, they're useful and I think this is the most useful part of it now, but the kind of specifics and the kind of...you can list a lot of useful things that they do, of course, and the Commonwealth Secretariat does it, the various functional bodies within the Commonwealth, the formal government bodies and the non-government bodies all do very useful things and I think that one should not talk them down. I think the Commonwealth retains a place and these councils of the Commonwealth remain full of very high grade expertise which clearly looks at real problems in a very intelligent way, so I think all that is to the good. But it doesn't give you a feeling of excitement now.

PM: Yes, and do you think India sees it as a kind of diplomatic asset having an Indian Secretary General?

SH: Yeah, I think that's a good thing. Obviously we're very happy that Kamallesh is there and this, remember, is something that India assumed that India would not be a suitable country from which to draw a Secretary General, because it was too big. It had too many...what should we say, I don't know. It had too many interests of its own, maybe too many chips on its shoulder maybe. You know, it was felt that this was an uncomfortable kind of presence. Better to have someone from a country that did not bring so much baggage with it. But that has changed and having now a Secretary General. Do you remember there was an effort once for an Indian, J. S. Mehta. Do you remember that episode?

PM: No.

SH: You don't. This would have been in the '70s when Sonny's first term, Sonny had three terms, did he?

PM: Yes.

SH: Yeah, I think his first or second term, one of them, was coming to an end. India produced a candidate who was a Foreign Secretary, retiring Foreign Secretary of India, Mr J. S. Mehta who was a superb diplomat and very, very well known person and had been head of the Foreign Office, but his candidature was put up by India to succeed Sonny, but it didn't get anywhere. I don't think Sonny even had to strain too hard to retain his eminence and his position in the Commonwealth, because the time wasn't just right for India at that stage. It wasn't only a question of an individual. It was a question of whether this baggage carrying, large country would be appropriate. I mean, Britain has never had a Secretary General and because that would look as if it was trying to dominate it and to bend it to its own purpose, especially as it, of course, headquartered in London. Similarly with India, [it was] felt that it would not be a good idea. But now I think Kamallesh has been very low profile, the Commonwealth has perhaps appropriately so. The time had changed, it was not the time for grand initiatives. It's a time for good, solid and useful work.

- PM: Are there any other points that we haven't brought up about the Commonwealth and your experience of the Commonwealth that you think you'd like to put on the record?**
- SH: Let's see. I think that when I was talking to you just now looking back to my early days, there was a suspicion of Britain because it was a kind of love-hate relationship and so many people had studied in Britain. The centrality of Britain to the Commonwealth, the sense that Britain which was sustaining it financially was much the biggest contributor, might try and bend it to its own purpose with the kind of residual global role, something about that, some suspicions were there initially.
- PM: I think this is a very important point because when British diplomats talk about the Commonwealth, and try and justify their engagement with the Commonwealth, they talk about soft power. That the Commonwealth is the ultimate soft power mechanism and yet, because of precisely the issues you describe, I think the British have been very cautious about using the Commonwealth to exert influence because they don't want to be accused of being neo-colonialists.**
- SH: Yes, I think that's been very much the case. Of course, Britain has done some bad things like invading Suez and all that which had a very negative effect on its long term international role, but they've come out of it.
- PM: Yes, and indeed Mrs Thatcher's role over South Africa was seen as very destructive within the Commonwealth.**
- SH: Yes, so Britain has had to tread very carefully in this and there has been, I remember from my very young days, in particular, when countries had just emerged or were emerging, that there was this great episode, in Mozambique on the Rhodesia business.
- PM: Yes.**
- SH: That a tanker bringing oil...I forget the details of that, but I remember I was in London at the time. I was posted there when there was great excitement and a genuine division of opinion within Britain because some people in Britain felt that, well [there was] a more Conservative opinion, that "Why shouldn't we do it?" and "Who are these guys these Commonwealth or anyone else to tell us not to support our 'kith and kin'?" The 'kith and kin' argument which was, I think, a highly bogus one. But still it was heard loud and clear from certain segments of British opinion. There was a feeling that somewhere in the back rooms the British Foreign Office had a kind of undue role and their meetings...maybe this was just a kind of residual suspicion of the colonial power and I don't know whether anything of any great significance was happening then, but there was this.
- PM: Please could you just say something about Indian foreign policy making in general? You've said that you were head of Mrs Gandhi's private office in the 1970s.**
- SH: I wasn't Head.
- PM: What was your role?**

SH: I was called Director, but a Director is a rank. It's not someone who directs. It's just a rank and a pretty modest rank.

PM: And your role was an advisor on foreign policy?

SH: No, no, no. My role was hardly...foreign policy is too serious to be left to young pups like I was at that stage. My role was to do help with call work, escort visitors in and out, to take notes, to liaise with the Minister of External Affairs, to process ideas and thoughts that came and prepare them for the Prime Ministerial attention. I worked to our Secretary, who was a man of very great eminence and there was Mr P. N. Haksar, of course who was something of a legend and there was Professor Dhar. These were the close advisors, especially Professor Dhar, in my time, to Mrs Gandhi and I did a lot of things, like Moni, for Mrs Gandhi directly, but the serious stuff had to be filtered through serious people.

PM: So you had the Prime Minister's private office with the senior advisors, you had the Ministry of External Affairs. Was there ever any tension between those two bodies in terms of foreign policy making in relation to the Commonwealth, or otherwise?

SH: At that time Mrs Gandhi's ascendancy was so complete over the government apparatus that tensions...well, should we say, nobody could challenge her. There were no challenges to produce tensions. The challenges did exist of course; this is not a perfect world, it's not a monolithic world anyway. The tensions had a political dimension that they were regional leaders, for example, of whom some of them were getting too big for their boots. Some of them had to be disciplined in a particular way, which is the normal give-and-take of any ebb and flow between centre and state, that sort of thing. But the Foreign Offices weren't involved in this. These weren't matters of foreign policy that proved divisive and therefore created tensions in terms of what should be done. [As far as] Mrs Gandhi's ascendancy [was concerned], she was very respectful of authority...respectful is not the word I mean ... mindful of the people who worked for her, even a chap like me, and whatever she thought of me and she didn't think much. But when there were foreign visitors, I was always treated with good consideration because she didn't want to do down her own people in front of the world. So her personal style could be quite fierce, but also it was very measured, very controlled and it meant that there was no undue friction owing to personal factors.

PM: And do you think subsequently under different Prime Ministers there has been more friction?

SH: Not normally. I think that one of the things that struck me when I first joined the service, I had no idea that and I realised much later why this should be so. I think, actually, there's quite a culture of mutual courtesy. It's not universal, there have been many bad instances, but discourtesy costs you. If you are a leader or an aspiring leader and you publicly belittle your subordinates, this will cost you; and so I think that this was reassuring that there would be courteous behaviour between bureaucrats and ministers, for example.

PM: Good. This has been fantastic. Thank you so much.

SH: Well, thank you.