

**Interview with Patsy Robertson by Håkan Thörn on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2000, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website <http://www.aamarchives.org/>**

*Håkan Thörn: This is an interview with Patsy Robertson on 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2013. So when and where were you born?*

Patsy Robertson: Jamaica.

*HT: In?*

PR: Jamaica – in the Caribbean! [laughs]

*HT: Yeah, which year?*

PR: Oh, I shan't tell you that young man [laughs]

*HT: It's strictly confidential.*

PR: OK. Maybe you'll be able to guess when you hear my career.

*HT: So can you start by telling me a bit about your background and how you ended up working in the Commonwealth?*

PR: I grew up in Jamaica and attended grammar school there. In Jamaica, we grew up knowing a little bit about our history, about slavery, and the fact that during those years there were terrific slave riots, the fact that we had a group of people called the Maroons. They were former slaves who fled to the mountainous regions of the island when the Spanish fled to Cuba after the English fleet arrived in 1665. Jamaica is very, very hilly and the Maroons fought a guerrilla campaign against the English until well in the 1700s until the British government made a treaty with them, ceding them land, where they still live. Their society was organised along military lines and the leader was a Colonel, a title which is still used to this day. Before the treaty, the Maroons would raid the sugar estates on the plains, taking away slaves, and as part of the agreement with Britain they were required to stop helping the slaves rebelling on the estate and to return to the authorities any runaway slaves who joined them. Another example of the British using their military power to divide and conquer. But we had this idea in the back of our minds, that any attempt to keep people down is something that Jamaicans must instinctively fight against. Jamaica had big slave rebellions throughout this period and after the abolition of slavery in 1834, conditions for the ex-slaves, who received no help from the colonial government, became awful. In 1865, there was a major uprising in Morant Bay, the capital of the parish of St Thomas, which was led by Paul Bogle. This rebellion was put down with great brutality by the authorities and Bogle and George William Gordon, a mixed race businessman and politician who had encouraged people to air their grievances, were both hanged. Both Bogle and Gordon are now National Heroes. Because of this history, one grew up in Jamaica with the strong feeling that you simply had to fight against inequality, with strong feelings against unfairness, strong feelings that you've got to do something about injustice – that you've got to stand up for yourself. That I think is very much a Jamaican characteristic.

I was a newspaper reporter for a couple of years, and then I decided I wanted to go to the United States to university but I didn't want to enter into the dreadful racist American campus life. I wanted to go to New York. I found out about New York

because the tourist trade in Jamaica was just beginning and I interviewed many prominent visitors who were coming to Jamaica at that time. And one read American magazines and I read about the iconic annual art show in Greenwich Village and I thought, right, I want to go to Greenwich Village, I did not want to come to Britain. I mean it was the tradition that students went to Britain to university. The West Indies did not really get a University College until 1948, and it did not achieve full university status until some years later. So I enrolled at the Greenwich Village campus of New York University, where I had a great time but was shocked by the horrendous inequality and racism prevailing in the US. Even New York City was still quite racist with Greenwich Village and jazz clubs the only places where the races mingled freely. It was a time when the US was still segregated and even in the north, black Americans were still denied their basic civil rights. I remember there was a horrific lynching in the South when I was there and what shocked me was that there was no great moral outrage about it. I decided then that the US was not the country for me. I thought then at 20 that one of the great tragedies of humanity is the fact that America has never lived up to its constitution, never promoted true democracy either at home or abroad. And they were oblivious to the fact that they lived in a deeply flawed society, which did not live up to the ideals which they professed to revere.

I had planned to study medicine but changed to what was called a liberal arts degree and ended studying a great deal of American history. I had planned to go back to Jamaica to be a journalist but I had a sister in London who had come here to do a nursing course so I decided to visit her and look at the things I had learned because we were taught only British history at school. I would spend a year seeing Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, the Cathedrals and all the other tourist places. I'm still here. I also enrolled at the LSE to do a postgraduate degree in international relations, which I never completed. Now what happened was I got a job at the BBC, something quite lowly, because although I had done a degree in English History and Journalism, there was no way I was going to make a career in journalism in Britain. They were hardly hiring white women, much less black women, you know what I mean? [laugh]. Anyhow through friends, I got a job at the BBC working in the newsroom of the World Service at Bush House where they prepared the news bulletins. And from there, I joined the London office of the Federal Government of the West Indies which had begun to recruit staff for the proposed diplomatic service when independence was given to this new Caribbean nation. I thought well let me get into that because at least whatever happens somebody will pay my fare back to Jamaica. [laugh] I joined the service, then the Federation broke up and Jamaica became independent in 1962. I was sent for training at the then Commonwealth Relations Office and remained in London, still hoping to make my way back to Jamaica.

I became involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the '60s, and met people such as Gony Govender, an Indian from South Africa, who had fled that country because of the oppressive system that prevailed there. I also met Ethel de Keyser of the Defence and Aid Fund and so gradually began to become more involved in the struggle to end apartheid. My involvement was also underpinned by the fact that one of the first acts of pre-independent but self-governing Jamaica was to ban the entry of South African passport holders. It was also a time when countries were becoming independent. The empire was ending with many small island countries like Jamaica, and African countries were becoming independent. It was an amazing time in the '60s, where every year five or six countries became independent and joined the Commonwealth. The first thing newly independent governments did, I remember, was to state their opposition to apartheid and to the presence of South Africa in the Commonwealth. This determined effort to end apartheid became the defining issue for the new Commonwealth, and this was bitterly opposed by Britain, Australia and

New Zealand because in those days, those countries still thought it was a quite OK to overlook the reality of the apartheid system in South Africa. This attitude prevailed despite the Rivonia trial of Nelson Mandela and his colleagues and Sharpeville.

After my marriage in 1964, I left the Jamaican diplomatic service and with the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965, there was a need for staff for that organisation. I was lucky to join the staff in November later that year. Within a week of my joining, Ian Smith declared UDI and the Commonwealth's long struggle to end racism in Southern Africa began.

The Secretariat's staff was small, less than 20 persons, and one of the first acts by the new Secretary General, Arnold Smith, was to convene a meeting of Commonwealth leaders to discuss the situation. Nigeria offered to host it in January 1966. This was a historic meeting, the first outside of Britain, because prior to the establishment of the Commonwealth Secretariat, Britain had handled all the affairs of the Commonwealth. It was also the first to be devoted to one issue. It is useful to recall here that until the second half of the last century the Commonwealth was, as we like to say, a rich man's, white man's club. Its membership comprised Britain, four white Dominions – Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, as well as Rhodesia. All meetings were held in Downing Street and all was well in this cosy club.

The end of the second world war saw the independence of countries such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In the 1950s Malaysia, Ghana, Cyprus and Nigeria became independent, heralding the beginning of a change not only in colour but in outlook. The new Commonwealth was taking shape, and the '60s heralded a flood of countries moving into independence – from the Caribbean and Africa in particular. The immediate challenge that these newly independent countries, headed by leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Dr Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago, faced was how to ensure that the Commonwealth would be seen, not as a relic of empire, but a new association of states free from British domination. They wished to demonstrate that the Commonwealth was capable of looking after its affairs through an independent Secretariat which would be serving the interests of all its members and which would carry out a mandate set down by leaders at their regular meetings. In this way, the Commonwealth was able to meet in Lagos to challenge the British Government's response to the Rhodesian UDI, and to agree on joint action to end white domination in Southern Africa. The meeting agreed to establish committees to work towards securing international sanctions against Rhodesia and to assist people who were fleeing South Africa.

Another meeting of Heads of Government was held in September 1966 in London to meet the huge challenge which Britain's failure to put down the Rhodesian rebellion posed. At that meeting the Commonwealth came very close to breaking up over the issue of racism. They were very, very bitter meetings. A Prime Minister reportedly told the media in a private meeting that 'I've spent the morning in a meeting with people who have just come down from the trees'. That was the attitude. African and Caribbean nations were adamant that, if the Commonwealth was to survive, it could never, ever be soft on the events in Rhodesia. They increased pressure on Britain to take control and got agreement on NIBMAR, 'No independence before majority African rule'.

I was deeply involved in these events because I was the Secretariat's only press officer, which gave me access to leaders, delegations and the international media, which took a great deal of interest in the Commonwealth's activities. It was also fortuitous that the Anti-Apartheid Movement was receiving support from people all

over Britain and Scandinavia, but I think the contribution of the Commonwealth, which brought in governments from right around the world into the struggle, was crucial. The Commonwealth was totally committed to ending the rebellion first, and then racism in the entire Southern African region. The support of Canada, the oldest Dominion, was vastly important, and all its leaders over three decades remained solidly supportive of Commonwealth action. They were John Diefenbaker, Lester Pearson, Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney and Joe Clark – a roll call of honour. Pierre Trudeau was particularly interesting. He became Prime Minister in 1968 and he came to his first Commonwealth meeting in 1969 in London. He didn't feel very confident about the Commonwealth and told the meeting that he was there to listen. He heard the debate and eventually, made it clear that Canada would continue its support for the Commonwealth because Canada had been very much in the forefront of opposing what was happening in South Africa. The Commonwealth would have absolutely nothing to do with racism. That was very, very important because it meant that there would be no split along entirely racist lines when action was needed. At the same time, India's contribution was enormous. It spoke out against apartheid and racism at the United Nations, and it gave a great deal of moral, political and financial support particularly to African countries as they gained their independence in the following decades. In the following years, the Commonwealth put pressure on Britain to act, even to send in troops, if necessary, to end the Rhodesian rebellion. The kith and kin argument developed which ruled out any British military action against its own people in Rhodesia.

The next meeting was held in Singapore in 1971 and was particularly contentious. The new Prime Minister Ted Heath, elected in 1970, stated that he was minded to resume the selling of arms to South Africa, which had been banned by the previous Labour government. The Labour Government did not have the courage, or the strength, or the support to do what a Labour government should have done to end the rebellion. Then Ted Heath came in, and decided Britain was going to resume the sale of arms to the South African army. This precipitated a huge row. Delegations of African presidents and other leaders came to London to see him and he gave them sharp shrift. Some African countries threatened to leave the Commonwealth. Mr Heath also advised the Queen not to attend the meeting and she was advised to accept this advice. The subsequent meeting of leaders in Singapore was characterised by huge rows, all night meetings. Eventually Mr Heath decided that he would not go ahead with his plan to resume sales. He was reviled by the Tory press and by members of his own party.

Another aspect of Commonwealth action was the establishment of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC) in the late '60s. Through that Fund, we were able to develop schemes to assist the steady stream of young people coming out of Rhodesia and South Africa to further their studies in universities and colleges all over the Commonwealth. The idea was to train them to be able to work in their governments which would require a cadre of trained people because there weren't very many, say in Rhodesia. Right up until Rhodesia became Zimbabwe in 1980, one was very much involved in this whole effort to set up this huge scheme so that these young people could become involved in the governance of their countries.

At this time the Anti-Apartheid Movement was also involved in the struggle against Ian Smith as well and was not just concentrating on what was happening in South Africa. The plan was to deal with Rhodesia as the most immediate problem and to plan to move on to South Africa. This had been formulated by the first Secretary General Arnold Smith, and when Shridath Ramphal came in 1975, he had a basis for action and ratcheted up Commonwealth activities. He was able to act because he

built up strong links with an alliance of leaders who backed him – Trudeau in Canada, Manley in Jamaica, Pindling in The Bahamas, Malcolm Fraser in Australia who, although he was leader of a party which had strong links with South Africa, he was very much against any kind of racism, and gave full Australian support to joint Commonwealth action. There were the Gandhis in India, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, and Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia. Malaysia and Singapore were also crucial supporters, with Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad remaining steadfast right up to the end of apartheid in South Africa.

In addition, there was a Commonwealth consensus against racism and this enabled the development of a strong challenge to the British position, which appeared to be seeking a way to undertake minimum action to end the rebellion. Then, the Commonwealth raised the issue about sporting contacts, and agreed to push to ban Rhodesia from the Commonwealth Games, and South Africa from the Olympics. This led to the Gleneagles Agreement on Sport in 1977 at the London meeting of leaders. This was agreed at a retreat by leaders at Gleneagles in Scotland. The retreat was a Commonwealth invention based on the observation of how the meeting operated by Pierre Trudeau. He had agreed to host the meeting of in 1973 and he said that he and other leaders were of the view that if they did not use the Commonwealth to deal with major problems then it would be just useless. He said that all the leaders present at the meeting were the ultimate authorities in their countries, and could therefore understand the special difficulties which all leaders faced. He added that the Commonwealth was a fantastic network embracing rich and poor countries, every race and religion, encompassing the globe. They spoke each other's language and had evolved from the same system, with the same judiciaries and more or less the same educational systems. That was why the Commonwealth was so valuable – people met at all levels from ministers to civil servants, judges, parliamentarians, teachers and nurses. There was this layer of networks and there was no other association in the world where people could really sit and talk to each other rather than at each other. The Commonwealth was the only such organisation. And he said, 'Let us make use of our weekends where we can ... let us go away to a retreat, only spouses and one civil servant. We will sit down, we will be casual and relaxed with each other in sports clothes. We will play games.' In fact it got to the stage where by the time we reached Malaysia in '89, they were sitting around a campfire singing songs. And that has been the way the Commonwealth operated – to sit and talk frankly about international and national problems and then agree on action. The first retreat was in Canada in '73 and subsequent retreats laid the foundation for action on problems and agreement on how to move forward.

During the next six years, the Commonwealth continued to call for international sanctions against Rhodesia and South Africa. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, determined to end the crisis in Rhodesia by recognising the government led by Bishop Abel Muzorewa who was in an alliance with Ian Smith. This was rejected by the Commonwealth, which had scheduled its next meeting in Zambia, one of the front-line states. Shortly after she was elected she went to a meeting in Japan and then went on to visit Prime Minister Muldoon in New Zealand. He had been strongly opposed to what the Commonwealth had been doing. There had been the sporting boycott, which had prevented the New Zealand rugby team from visiting South Africa and when they tried to tour in Britain, there had been huge battles on and off the field. At a press conference with Mrs Thatcher, he announced that he planned to advise the Queen, who was Queen of New Zealand, not to go to Zambia – it was too dangerous. Ian Smith has bombed Lusaka, Thatcher, coming from Japan, has also said that at a press conference in Sydney where she was asked about Mr Muldoon's statement. The Queen had planned an extensive tour of several African countries on her way to Lusaka. She said, 'Well of course it's

something I will think about. I may have to advise the Queen not to go to Lusaka.' Now the Queen had been advised by Heath not to attend the meeting in Singapore and it has been reported that she had been most disappointed not to attend. However shortly after Mrs Thatcher's statement, there was an announcement from Buckingham Palace that the Queen would be going to Africa. She did and hundreds of thousands turned out to greet her in Tanzania and in the other countries she visited. On the day that both the Queen and Mrs Thatcher were due to arrive in Lusaka, the local paper had an interesting article on the 'two ladies from Britain'. On the one hand, it wrote, we welcome today Queen Elizabeth II, who has a kind heart, and who has stuck by the Commonwealth. On the other hand, here comes this iron lady who is determined to oppose any Commonwealth action to end the impasse over Rhodesia. The meeting began in a tense atmosphere, but ended in agreement which led to the Lancaster House negotiations and the eventual independence of Zimbabwe.

After Zimbabwe's independence, the Commonwealth turned its guns on South Africa. In all the years when apartheid flourished in South Africa, the Commonwealth was very much involved in the fight to end it. During this period we had allowed ANC representatives to attend Commonwealth meetings, where they could meet and talk to delegations. I gave them press accreditation but it had to be done discreetly because they were considered to be members of a terrorist organisation. Thatcher did call the South Africans terrorists. She was told by Ramphal, 'Do not call them terrorists'. I think she even called Tutu a terrorist! Now of course, if you read her memoirs and those of other politicians and officials, the British Government did it all. They were the architects of change and it is the most blatant re-writing of history that I have ever seen.

But because Commonwealth representatives in London had maintained very close links with the Anti-Apartheid Movement we knew that our efforts were recognised. I first met Ethel de Keyser when I was in the Jamaican mission, who asked for a donation to a fundraising event she was organising. One helped as best one could, and facilitated meetings with leaders and other high officials visiting London. They were allowed to come to meetings to lobby the Heads of Government, to distribute literature, to speak to journalists from all over the world. So in this way the message about what was happening in Southern Africa got out. It wasn't just what Reuters or AP was writing, these were other journalists from member countries talking to people and they could send articles worldwide. I think that was a very valuable contribution which we made. It meant that when the Commonwealth decided we had to do something about apartheid in South Africa everything was in place.

In 1981 we went to Delhi, where under the chairmanship of Mrs Gandhi important decisions were made. Action would now concentrate on South Africa. There would be more help for the ANC. In fact there was a discussion about the supply of arms to the ANC. Agreement was reached on a number of issues such as assistance for Zambia, which was bearing the brunt of the South African retaliation against neighbouring countries which were assisting the ANC. India agreed to send rice to Zambia and other food aid. But the tide was turning against South Africa. The Commonwealth was involved in all aspects of the struggle, which now had the support of governments and people all over the world. The Secretariat was present at a host of events – the big concerts at Wembley and the Free Mandela events – where Secretary General Ramphal was a regular speaker. He dubbed apartheid the modern face of slavery and really worked hard to get the message out. He was roundly abused by the majority of the British media, with the exception of papers like the Guardian, the Observer and the Financial Times. But other media were hostile to the Commonwealth, and really wanted Britain to leave it. There were derogatory

articles, Commonwealth leaders were routinely dismissed as corrupt and incompetent. After our meeting in Delhi, *The Times* had a leader saying it was time Britain left this ridiculous organisation full of dictators and what have you. It was the worst possible interpretation of what the Commonwealth was all about.

In 1981 at the meeting in Melbourne, Prime Minister Muldoon told a journalist that Shridath Ramphal was just a jumped up secretary and he should only take notes. This had been widely reported in the British press and a leading newspaper assigned a reporter to look into whatever they could find on Shridath Ramphal. It was the time when Grenada had been invaded by American troops. This action has been criticised at the Delhi meeting in 1983 and by Ramphal as Secretary General. The aftermath of these actions was that the British media became even more determined to destroy the Commonwealth. The effort to build a case against the Secretary General was part of this campaign and fortunately I was able to meet the journalist, show him all relevant material and the article was dropped. However, before the Nassau meeting in 1985, the *Sunday Times* and the *Telegraph* printed articles alleging among other fibs, that Ramphal was climbing over the palace walls to whisper poison in the Queen's ear against Mrs Thatcher. There were stories that the Queen and Mrs Thatcher had fallen out over the Commonwealth and this was a terrible thing for Britain. 'Should the Queen take advice from some of these countries? The Queen should not take advice from anybody. Why is she consorting with these crooks and murderers?'. They tried to destroy member states and the Commonwealth itself, because every time there was an important meeting, the host country would be vilified in certain sections of the British media. It reached its nadir when a campaign was launched against Prime Minister Pindling of The Bahamas before the meeting in 1985. He was called a drug dealer and a thief. It was shameful that 'The Queen was asked to go to be a guest of this person'. And so it went on.

Well, we learned to ignore it because we knew that strangely enough there was such a strong support for the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain, a grassroots support which had people standing outside the South African Embassy in London picketing it for years. They pressured their government, and never let up. We knew that the British papers really were not that damaging in the long run because any sensible person would know what they were doing. What was very interesting was the kind of venom which was poured over the Commonwealth really escalated when we touched South Africa. The links with the City were strong, and South Africa was big money. We were also told that strange things happened. There was a journalist who was obviously close to the security services who told us that the view was that Britain and America had agreed that they would sacrifice Rhodesia but the stand was going to be the Limpopo, as they had no intention of handing South Africa to the communists. The cold war was still on.

When we went to Nassau for the 1985 meeting, ANC officials were well represented behind the scenes. That meeting led to the agreement to send a high level mission to South Africa to confront the South Africans, to tell them, 'You can't go on like this any more'. Now by this time the Commonwealth had about 50 members, with 49 members for action against one, Britain. There was agreement on a list of sanctions against South Africa which the US congress later adopted – their first ever after supporting apartheid for nearly four decades. We also built up our relations with groups in America, particularly in the African-American community, which was able to put pressure on Congress to take action against South Africa. You know what I mean, yes. Over the years we had built up all these links.

*HT: You don't mean the ACOA [American Committee on Africa]?*

PR: You know who I mean. Our view of the UN was that it was pretty pathetic. The UN is a very difficult organisation but when they say 'We did this' or 'We did that', we knew that the Commonwealth had governments which were pledged to be in the forefront of the struggle. They had agreed to support the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the ANC. Secretary General Ramphal was very close to Oliver Tambo, who headed the ANC office in exile.

We had meetings at Marlborough House, held a birthday party for Oliver Tambo, who was very close to Trevor Huddleston who also celebrated his 80th birthday with us at Marlborough House. We made it our duty to meet and work closely with all groups involved in opposing apartheid – in this way they knew the Commonwealth was behind them. The question of the mission to South Africa was very interesting. Would the British help? Geoffrey Howe was Foreign Secretary, who I think in his heart was quite supportive, but was not able to assist because it was not the policy of Mrs Thatcher. I think people worked to persuade her that Britain had to support this mission. It is agreed, I think, that she did persuade South Africa's Prime Minister to accept the mission, because they could have refused to allow it. We had Malcolm Fraser of Australia and General Obasanjo of Nigeria, two former Heads of Government, leading the mission. The British government nominated a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Barber. He had been a director of Standard Chartered Bank, one of the first banks to leave South Africa under pressure, unlike Barclays which stayed until they really had to jump ship, so to speak. We had an excellent team which included Nita Barrow from Barbados, who had been with the World Council of Churches, who had been Barbadian ambassador to the UN, and who had a huge international outreach. So we put together this team and they went to South Africa. You must know this story of the mission?

*HT: This is in '85 isn't it?*

PR: They went in '86.

*HT: '86?*

PR: I thought it was early '86 but. I might be wrong. Late '86. Yes, it might be. When they had returned from South Africa, their report 'Mission to South Africa' was published? Have you a copy?

*HT: No.*

PR: You don't have a copy of 'Mission to South Africa'? [Incredulous]. I hope I can find a copy. 'Mission to South Africa' was published by Penguin and it became an international best seller. It set out the details of their visit and when they eventually had to walk out of South Africa, they had already developed the negotiating concept, which they recommended to the South African government. It was quite simple – first 'Free Nelson Mandela', 'Unban the ANC', 'Release political prisoners' and 'Hold an election'. This is in fact exactly what happened in 1991 when the government decided to come to terms with the fact that change was inevitable in South Africa. I have to add that at the Vancouver 1987 meeting, Mrs Thatcher was in full anti-ANC mode and told a press conference that anyone who ever thought that the ANC would rule South Africa was living in cloud-cuckoo land.

At that time, Mrs Thatcher was isolated on this issue. She was absolutely sure that she was right and in Malaysia, at the retreat – that's where they sang songs – I don't think she participated, she sulked in her tent. The Commonwealth agreed on further action to isolate South Africa. It had been the practice that after the retreat, the host

Prime Minister and the Secretary General would hold a press conference where they would announce the agreements reached by the Commonwealth, adding the words 'with the exception of Britain' where necessary. We had elected a new Secretary General that Friday, before they'd gone on retreat and he was giving a reception that Sunday evening. John Major, who was then Foreign Secretary, his brief moment as Foreign Secretary, was there. He was at the party. Towards the end of the party his staff came and hurried him away, then my staff said 'Come back to the press centre immediately, the British media are angry that they might have been misled on the agreements at the retreat by the British briefing'. I was the spokesperson, Director of Information, and I was then told 'You've got to come back – there's a riot. British journalists have returned from a briefing given by Charles Powell and Bernard Ingham in which the agreement reached at Langkawi was totally rubbished.

The reason for this response by the British media was because this had become a pattern which had created problems for them. It was a technique that had been used at previous meetings when, after the official press conference by the host and the SG, the British would brief their own media and totally destroy the Commonwealth position. This had happened in at all meetings since 1979 when she came to power, and the line taken was to reassure the British people that she had told off the Commonwealth and held her ground in support of South Africa. The tone was that these people must not dictate to a British Prime Minister. She did it consistently and it ensured that the Monday morning papers in Britain would be given the line that she had won again. It took us a little time to realise, because we didn't see the British papers until we returned to London and saw the clippings. Her classic was in Nassau when we had agreement to send the mission to South Africa. She actually said on British television 'I've only given them a teeny, teeny bit' as she curled her lip. I never saw that clip till four years later and I was so horrified that this woman could be so, what is the word, dishonest. There's no other word to use. And that's what she did. However, by Malaysia when that happened the governments were totally fed up. The Monday morning session was riveting as leaders turned on her and really roasted her. One's not supposed to talk about what happened in that session, but a leader said to her 'Margaret, I begged my friends Kenneth and Julius to find an agreement with you. They were not prepared to do but they agreed. And then you do this to me? Margaret, you don't make an agreement at 5 and repudiate it at 7.' And it went round the table like that. Of course she was totally unrepentant. But that was, I think, part of the beginning of the end. That was '89, she was gone by '90. John Major became Prime Minister and worked to bring Britain into the Commonwealth family.

Of course by then I think everyone, including the South Africans, knew that time was running out in South Africa, although people like me, who had been so close to everything, thought that apartheid was going to last much longer. The edifice which appeared so strong on the outside and so brutal, so prepared to do anything to survive, suddenly began to crack. Suddenly Nelson Mandela was out of prison. And I think one of the great, great moments, certainly of my life was a fortnight after he came out of prison Kenneth Kaunda invited him up to Lusaka to meet and thank all the organisations which had worked so hard to secure his freedom. The Commonwealth was well represented by countries which had been on the Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa, as well as by the Secretary General and members of the staff of the Commonwealth Secretariat. It was a very emotional meeting. He knew what the Commonwealth had done and he was grateful.

Kenneth Kaunda has been much maligned. He became one of the great whipping boys of the British press. They accused him of everything, including being corrupt and useless. His capital was bombed and his people suffered. But he was steadfast in supporting the people of South Africa. He almost sacrificed Zambia. The

Commonwealth also made allowances during all these years. It was agreed that countries in Southern Africa would not be expected to impose sanctions on South Africa. [52:57.2 – tape cuts out]

[1:00:33.7 – tape restarts]

PR: Part of our technique to get our message across was to use the international media, and in particular radio, to reach out to the people in the townships in South Africa. A great deal of my time was to ensure that Shridath Ramphal's speeches and statements were broadcast regularly. We were accessible to every journalist passing by. We broadcast a lot on the BBC World Service, and to any service that had an outreach. That included the Russian and Chinese radio. We were accessible to them, they could always get an interview. Even in prison, people hear these things. I always said to him, 'You must remember you are talking to the women and children in Soweto. What you are doing is for them. Don't worry about the abuse but if you can give them a little bit of courage that's enough. That is a very important part of this battle.'

*HT: Did you finance radio...?*

PR: No, no, just people. One good thing about London is that practically everyone has a correspondent here. So you could talk to just about every major news organisation in the world, and what was particularly useful, many of them had international broadcasts which reached South Africa. So we did not rely entirely on the western media.

*HT: So you used the main channels?*

PR: Yes, you used the main channels, absolutely. And the news agencies, such as Reuters. I also found that there was a great deal of sympathy for the cause even among journalists who worked on papers where their proprietors and their editors were absolutely and firmly supporters of the status quo in South Africa.

Those journalists were always very supportive and would write about what we were trying to do and even if sometimes it wasn't quite what you wanted, it kept what the Commonwealth was doing in the public eye. Throughout Africa, for instance, we used national news agencies such as the Nigerian and Ghanaian news agencies. Years later whenever I go to Africa, people still talk about hearing Shridath Ramphal on the radio and always say 'What's happened to that man? What's happened to him?' The things he used to say because he was very, very bold and then I look back and thought 'Jesus! No Secretary General should have been so caustic about a member government.' [Pause] The British government knew that their position was morally indefensible so they couldn't be too proactive in terms of coming out and attacking the Commonwealth. Despite the fact that they are the biggest donors to the Secretariat's budget, they never ever tried to use their financial clout to punish the organisation. But they had their little tricks. I remember when the first election was being held in Rhodesia in 1980. the Commonwealth insisted that they would have to monitor the elections. Now during the Lancaster House conference, every night a British government representative came and reported to Commonwealth High Commissioners on the state of the negotiations in Lancaster House. There were lengthy debates on the negotiations and it was emphasised that any election in Rhodesia would be monitored by a Commonwealth team. It was pointed out that the British would have to send in troops, and disarm the warring parties and so could not

hold an election which would be accepted by the political parties. Basically the Commonwealth's position was 'We're not going to trust you to run that election.'

Britain had by then assumed the governing role in Rhodesia. Lord Soames was the Governor General. Just when the Lusaka Agreement was reached on the way forward, the officer who regularly reported to Commonwealth High Commissioners on the status of the negotiations announced that, 'the British government has written to all Commonwealth governments individually, inviting them to send monitoring teams. Australia, New Zealand and Canada had accepted as well as a small Caribbean island.' The meeting erupted and a representative of a small Caribbean island said 'Do you expect us to send one man to monitor an election? No! We want a Commonwealth group.' British said 'Well we will not pay for it' and after a furious debate, the Nigerian representative said that the Nigerian government would underwrite the cost of a pan-Commonwealth monitoring team. It was a difficult election, there was no official voters list, but the people had a chance to vote for whom they wanted and that was Robert Mugabe.

In retrospect, an examination of Britain's behaviour over this period of some 30 years, from 1960 when Commonwealth pressure began with the departure of South Africa until 1994, must lead to the conclusion that their lack of interest in racial justice was breathtaking. But when they realised that South Africa was crumbling they really worked to make the transition as peaceful as possible, I'll give them that. They really fought a tough rear guard battle to hold the Commonwealth back, but they never succeeded. They did continue to support Commonwealth projects, such as the Commonwealth Fund, which educated exiled Zimbabweans and then South Africans. Britain continued to pay the major share of the budget and Canada was also very generous. But there were other sources of funding because all governments, regardless of how poor they were, contributed and were able to feel that they had made a great contribution to this struggle. It worked. It worked. We won! We succeeded. Seeing Nelson Mandela and how he has turned out to be this wonderful, forgiving iconic figure, is a vindication of all those years of fighting against some very powerful forces in this modern world.

*HT: You already mentioned different kinds of strategies, but is there anything more you can say in terms of what kind of strategies you had to get the media attention?*

PR: In a way the anti-apartheid struggle was pre-eminent, and it became the moral struggle of our times. To a certain extent one didn't have to do much. Looking back, it was fairly easy because as long as you were willing to speak out and speak up and give the media access, give them quotes and a story, you had to succeed. As long as you were prepared to do that, you were guaranteed not only access but significant exposure all over the world. Many times you give stories to the media and it never gets reported but we never had any problems with that. It was worldwide. You'd have the American papers like the *Christian Science Monitor* which had a moral position, as well as *The New York Times*, you had easy access to these people. Once you said 'I want to talk about South Africa, I want to talk about what's happening.' Oh God yes, they're there. In a way that part was made easy because of the nature of the topic.

*HT: Was that all along?*

PR: Oh yes. Yes.

*HT: Because the AAM felt, particularly in the '70s, they had difficulties being heard.*

PR: Yes, yes. Certainly AAM was mainly based in London right? The British papers were concentrating on Rhodesia. Rhodesia was the thing in the '70s. Rhodesia was the story, not South Africa. The horrors in South Africa were fully reported, but in terms of government commitment to ending racism in Southern Africa, it was Rhodesia that was the main story for two decades. The other thing too is that – how do I put this? South Africans in exile weren't very skilful with the media [laugh]. The ANC had a spokesman, a lovely man, but hopeless with the media, hopeless. He used to come to my press conferences and I despaired at his briefings.

*HT: You're talking about the AAM?*

PR: Yes, yes and the ANC. It really was the ANC people who used to come. What's his name?

*HT: Someone who worked with the ANC or AAM?*

PR: I think it might have been the ANC. He might have been out of Lusaka, but you see they had a colleague who lived in Norway throughout the whole period. He is Abdul Minty, who visited London regularly and met many officials and journalists, but I always felt they never made it easy for journalists to write actual articles on what they were doing. I accept that they had to keep much of their work confidential, but if you meet the media, you have to tell them something which they can write about. But they never really developed a coherent message. They never understood you had to get on television and perform. Television is a medium for actors, so anybody who goes on television has to be properly trained and have the points at hand they wish to make. They weren't able to command the media attention they deserved because of a lack of finance and people who were media trained. They were never as effective as they could be, but that's really no fault of theirs. I don't blame them, certainly in the London scene they slogged away, they issued their press releases. But the story in the '70s was Rhodesia. The Commonwealth activity was the story, not the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

*HT: Didn't any solidarity with the struggle in South Africa depend on what happened inside South Africa. You had Sharpeville in '60, Soweto in '76, '85. Those are the peaks of media attention.*

PR: Media attention, yes. For instance, in Nassau the South Africans were going to execute some chaps in South Africa. The Commonwealth sent an appeal to the South African President asking for clemency. This we sent through the Canadian ambassador in South Africa. That was used by some of the media saying 'Look at the Commonwealth, they're sending an appeal and there's no way the appeal can get to South Africa.' Even John Simpson, who was the BBC's main reporter, reported this, so I wrote him a stern letter and have never respected his opinions to this day. The point is that the appeal was reported in some sections of the South African media, as well as on international radio, so I have no doubt that black South Africans knew that the Commonwealth had appealed against another senseless killing by the regime. But I am not trying to say that these organisations such as the ANC, the AAM and the Defence and Aid Fund were totally ineffective, they had their means of reaching people. We worked very closely with them. What I am saying is that they were not able, for a variety of reasons, to command the high profile international media attention which the Commonwealth was able to do at this time.

*HT: The Defence and Aid Fund?*

PR: Yes. We allowed all of those people to meet with and brief Commonwealth officials. My recollection is that there was a feeling among journalists who really covered the issues that Rhodesia was a British problem and they concentrated on that issue. But we must remember that all the anti-apartheid movements were working under very difficult circumstances, they were being penetrated by security personnel from a number of countries, including Britain and South Africa, their offices and personnel were blown up, and they had very few resources. They were not slick, but then I don't think that should be held against them. It was a big struggle for them to keep going. I think maybe only Scandinavian governments were funding them then. Who else was funding them except ordinary people in Britain and in other countries?

*HT: They were the major funders. If you assess what kind of relations you had with different organisations, which ones were more close than others? If you take the ANC, the PAC, the AAM, IDAF, the UN Secretariat?*

PR: Which we had closest ...? ANC and AAM, not the PAC, Oh my God, that man came to meetings.

*HT: Who was that? David Sibeko?*

PR: No, no. He was an Asian. They had an Asian chap who went around the world. And he was their main international representative who came to Commonwealth meetings. He was not at all effective. It was a great pity. I think there was a feeling that the PAC was just a sideshow. They were getting in the way of the serious work which had to be done by the ANC. Of course we tried to work closely with the UN. One always tries to work closely with the UN and Mr Reddy, their representative, but I'm not sure what they achieved.

*HT: I think perhaps later, in the '80s that Mr Rumsfeld and Mr Reddy had some closer contact.*

PR: Oh yes, yes. We always tried to work closely with any UN mission. Again, it is always difficult for the UN to act. The Security Council could not act because Britain and US were vetoing any proposed action on South Africa. People forget that. One really should count up the number of vetoes that Britain cast on any issue dealing with South Africa during those years. It is a shameful catalogue.

*HT: The Apartheid Committee were working very much as a partisan force within the UN because Mr Reddy was working a lot with NGOs and in spite of what actually the Security Council did, their policy was to assist the anti-apartheid movement.*

PR: I think the big difference was because until really the Commonwealth got its act together, it was only the Scandinavian governments which were showing any kind of solidarity. The Commonwealth also initiated training for exiles who were allowed to go to universities all over the Commonwealth. India trained a lot of people. We took the view that it was also better to train them in developing countries. Many went to the University of the West Indies, some went to Australia, to Canada, some came to Britain, to Malta and to other universities in many other countries, including Africa. They were sent wherever they could be given the best training. And I think that made a great difference, to morale at least.

*HT: Were there any other organisations that you had contacts with that we haven't mentioned?*

PR: Let me think...

*HT: How about the unions and the churches?*

PR: World Council of Churches, very powerful. We never had much contact with the trade unions. Remember, in the '80s they were fighting for their lives. There was always union solidarity and the unions I think contributed, certainly to the Anti-Apartheid Movement. People like the Labour MP Robert Hughes never wavered. He was a tower of strength and represented all those people in Britain who hated racism and apartheid. People like that were really outstanding. On the other hand, there was a feeling in certain powerful circles that everybody involved in the struggle were no-hopers, who would never succeed. But the support of ordinary people, the support of unions, the support of many Labour MPs was crucial. There were times when working in the Secretariat, one thought 'Oh my God, how long is this going to go on? Will we ever see a light at the end of this tunnel? Will we ever bring down this huge edifice, solidly backed by money emanating out of the City of London and I presume the big banks all over the world.' They had a huge stake in South Africa, not so much in Rhodesia. You just felt it would never end. I honestly thought it would never happen in my life time, that there would be no change to the system there.

*HT: To summarise, you mentioned a number of people who have been important in the Commonwealth. Just to summarise, the high profile people in the Commonwealth in relation to the South African cause, who were they?*

PR: I'll start with the leaders. Pierre Trudeau, Canada. Malcolm Fraser. He was the first Australian Prime Minister ever to visit Africa. Coming to Lusaka he went on a tour of West Africa, the first and only Australian Prime Minister ever to do that. He was solid, as was Bob Hawke, who was tough and articulate. Both Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. Michael Manley in Jamaica who hosted the meeting in 1975.. Pindling in the Bahamas who was host to a crucial 1985 meeting. I mustn't forget anybody. There were the great Canadians, who consistently opposed apartheid – Diefenbaker, Pearson, Trudeau, Mulroney, Joe Clarke. Then Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia was excellent. He was courageous, outspoken and was a successful national leader. Of course there were the African leaders, with Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia. Nyerere intellectually was a great force and Kaunda was a solid supporter. There was also Seretse Khama from Botswana, who at the behest of the South African government had been demoted by Britain as Chief of his people when he married an Englishwoman. Funnily enough Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore was also important. He was very intellectual, as well as very, very blunt and outspoken. He tried from early on to convey to African leaders that until they achieved economic independence, they would never be truly independent. I don't think they liked it at the time, but he was right. He did once say to Margaret Thatcher, 'It's racism and we cannot tolerate it'. But he added an astringent quality at the meetings. He was very sharp in the debates and although he wasn't in the forefront of the struggle, his contributions in the meetings helped to clarify people's minds, I think

Now that I look back at that period, there were so many outstanding people who had an international profile that made it easy to catch the world's attention. In a way, the struggle was joined at the right time. It was a time when so many countries were gaining their independence, and at Commonwealth meetings, practically everyone seated around the table in the early days had brought his country into independence. They had had developed an international profile as they led their struggles for independence and they did have a kind of aura. They were all known to the British and other media and many of them had commanded the attention certainly of important journalists. In the '60s and '70s that helped the Commonwealth to build

and maintain a high profile. I think we mustn't forget that was a really remarkable time in the history of the world. Have I left out anybody? I remember seeing Jomo Kenyatta. At the first meeting I attended after Jamaica became independent, I saw Nehru. I also saw Menzies from Australia. Pearson of Canada – legendary people. Jomo Kenyatta came to London for the meeting in 1964. He was staying at the Dorchester. He was a huge figure, still hated by many and revered by others. There were always crowds outside Marlborough House. One day, as he was coming out of the Dorchester, someone threw a bag of offal at him. He never came back to London. I once had a visitor throw a smelly bag at me in the office during those turbulent times.

[Pause]

It was really easy to command media attention, good or bad. Now they say any publicity's better than no publicity. Despite the media attacks on us, one knew you could get media attention if you had anything serious to say. So our technique was always to come up with something big. Have I left out any of our leaders? We even had Archbishop Makarios from Cyprus, fighting his Cyprus battles – again, a huge person in terms of the media. Ratu Mara from Fiji, a patrician Oxford-educated Prime Minister from the Pacific, spoke well, speaking up against racism in Southern Africa. They were a group of leaders who were, in their own way, quite remarkable. I look back and I think I didn't know how lucky I was. Now I have to tell you the Commonwealth today has mundane leaders. There isn't one star there. I think the anti-apartheid struggle and the Commonwealth came together at the right time. I do believe if we were doing it now, nobody would pay quite as much attention, to be quite honest.

*HT: You organised a conference in '85 on media and apartheid.*

PR: Oh yes! I can't even remember. You saw the papers? Gosh. That was with the African American Institute or was it something at Harvard? Ferraro?

*HT: I think the Special Committee might have been involved as well.*

PR: Yes, I have to look it up. We brought together senior media representatives, many of whom had worked in South Africa to discuss the situation. This was '85.

*HT: What was the background to take the initiative?*

PR: There was a lot of work also being done not only by us but by, I think it was the African American Institute, and there was also a group at Harvard. These American groups had been inviting senior British journalists to conferences and seminars in America. So they also had a coterie of journalists who would attend anything they were involved in. So we got together with them and I think the UN and we put on this conference and we had an excellent turn out and I do remember, we went over the issues with them. There were a lot of sceptics because of course there were people there from the African-American institute who were not known to British journalists. I was sitting at a table with some of the real Fleet Street diehards who didn't really believe in the anti-apartheid campaign for a start. Didn't believe in anything or anybody and their comments on the speeches and so forth were quite cynical.. But they came, and they listened. I remember Sonny Ramphal introduced Thabo Mbeki to them as a future President of South Africa. They were just sceptical – not all of them, but there was a group of six who were most scornful of that idea. I think these were chaps who would write leaders and they were very senior journalists, some were deputy editors, not just the foot soldiers. But they made their scepticism known. By and large it was a very good conference. We had a great turnout and this was all

part of the whole exercise which had been going on. That's how the Americans, I think, made quite a contribution. Some of their non-governmental think tanks were well funded, they could get at their own journalists and they built up in America a very distinguished group of journalists who were very supportive of the anti-apartheid struggle. That was very, very helpful. I found American journalists were by and large much better than most of their British counterparts. You know if you talk to *The New York Times*, there would be a good story in *The New York Times*, there would be a good leader in *The New York Times*. If it was up to a journalist from *The Times*, there would be a story, it would be cut down, and there might be a bad leader in *The Times*. *The Times* was very much against what we were doing. This happened under Mr Murdoch, I'd have you to know, there's a whole thesis to be written on his baleful influence on the British media.

In retrospect [pause] I think the way we managed to do it was to reach out to everybody. Anywhere. And because we went to many countries for meetings and I knew lots of journalists and they came to Britain to cover our meetings. There was some 50 Australian journalists who would cover the Commonwealth you knew them all. 20 from New Zealand. 30 from Nigeria. So over the 20-year period one had these links with Indians, Malaysians, Caribbean and American journalists. They used to come to Commonwealth meetings, I don't think they do any more. *Time* magazine, *New York Times*. There was always a story and it was usually a front-page story, so journalists loved to come to our meetings where they could also meet anti-apartheid and ANC representatives. They didn't have to go to Lusaka where the ANC office was based. If you visited the media centre at a Commonwealth meeting you could chat to Thabo Mbeki, you had our friend Abdul Minty, and other ANC people, including the official spokesman, who became the first Foreign Minister of the new South Africa. I think we were lucky, we were in the right place at the right time. We took up the cudgels. But it was the support of governments from all over the world, absolutely determined to bring change which gave us our strength and made a big difference. I don't think that this will ever happen again.

*HT: Is there anything at all written on Mr Ramphal's background? Or could you say a few words?*

PR: Yes, I can give you his CV. You should read, I'll give you a book of his speeches. He made a lot of speeches about apartheid. Oh my God, he spoke up and down the world! Against apartheid. And when he called apartheid 'the modern form of slavery' people were in shock. Britain and the US were accused of appeasing South Africa, which enraged the British who did not like to be accused of appeasement – Czechoslovakia all over again. But although the battles were heated, there was always a spirit of reconciliation at these meetings and people could meet over dinner and be perfectly friendly and cooperative. Indeed, when Mrs Thatcher was leaving Downing Street she gave Sonny Ramphal a farewell dinner and she got up and said 'Sonny, you were a worthy opponent, I salute you'. There is a follow-up to this event. I had arranged for *the Independent* to do an interview with him some days before and as fate would have it, this was published on the morning after the dinner with a headline quote from him stating 'The trouble with Thatcher she never understood what apartheid meant to black people'. I thought, 'Oh my God, there he was supping at her table last night'. We were upset because it seemed to be discourteous, but it was true. In all the years I had observed her, she never once accepted the reality of what life was like for the African people living under racist regimes. But he was leaving office in 1990 after 15 years and he was right in articulating this basic fact. She never really understood what apartheid meant. She thought it was bearable. There were poor people who one day might become educated and useful. I believe implicitly that this was her attitude, not only to poor

blacks but to all poor people. Certainly I feel her willingness to accept the conditions in South Africa and her annoyance that the Commonwealth had a different view coloured the way the entire British establishment looked at the Commonwealth.

Anyhow, let me give you some things on Ramphal, because he was remarkable. He's the person you should interview, not me! [Laugh]

*HT: No, but you've been there all along.*

PR: Yes, well it should be written about, with correct dates dates and it should be done before it is forgotten ...

*HT: Thank you.*