

Remembering Sir Shridath (Sonny) Ramphal, Commonwealth Secretary-General 1975-1990

I have come from Nigeria to this hallowed chamber of the historic Queen's Chapel to pay tribute to a friend, to a colleague of 15 years, and to an immeasurable champion of the Commonwealth.

I first met Sonny Ramphal in August 1972 at the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Non-Aligned countries in Georgetown, Guyana. Sonny was then Guyana's Foreign Minister and as such the host and Chairman of the meeting. The first Commonwealth Secretary-General, Arnold Smith, had sent me then Director of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Political Affairs Division as an Observer at the meeting. Sonny's brilliance in conducting the meeting and his personal bonhomie made a lasting impression on me, and on a number of Foreign Ministers with whom I talked during the meeting.

My next encounter with Sonny was in the following year at the Ottawa Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) to which he accompanied President Forbes Burnham of Guyana as Foreign Minister. I was the Conference Secretary of the meeting. Among the topics in the informal discussions in the corridors was the likely successor to the first Commonwealth Secretary-General who would be chosen at the next CHOGM in Kingston Jamaica. From my conversations with several Foreign Ministers, it was clear to me that Sonny Ramphal was the front runner.

And so it was that at the CHOGM in Kingston in 1975, Sonny was easily unanimously elected by the Heads of Government as the second Commonwealth Secretary-General. I worked closely with him in Marlborough House, first as Assistant Commonwealth Secretary-General from 1975 to 1977, and later as Deputy Commonwealth Secretary General in charge of political affairs and administration from 1978 to 1990 except during the five months when I was invited home in 1983 to serve as Nigeria's Foreign Minister.

Although the continuing existence of the Commonwealth into the future is of course now firmly assured, it must not be forgotten that the Association in its history faced two serious existential threats arising from the situations in Rhodesia and in apartheid South Africa.

The situation in the then British colony of Southern Rhodesia following the unilateral declaration of independence in November 1965 by the white racist minority regime of Ian Smith, had in the view of several Commonwealth governments, especially those in Africa, called for the use of military force by the British Government to deal with what they regarded both as a rebellion against The Crown, and as a direct challenge to a foundational principle of the multiracial Commonwealth. The Rhodesian crisis therefore had remained an existential threat to the Commonwealth which successive British Governments of Prime Ministers Harold Wilson, Ted Heath and Jim Callaghan tried but failed to resolve.

It was Secretary-General Sonny Ramphal who with the potent influence of the late Head of the Commonwealth HM Queen Elizabeth II at the CHOGM in Lusaka in August 1979 succeeded in defusing the threat. He did this by getting the Heads of Government to adopt the seminal Lusaka Declaration on Racism and Racial Prejudice, and more importantly, by getting them to reach the agreement which led to the convening of the Lancaster House Conference that resolved the situation in Rhodesia and settled the constitution of the resultant Independent Republic of Zimbabwe.

I should perhaps here tell an anecdote of how Sonny handled an incident that would almost certainly have torpedoed the agreement on Rhodesia at the Lusaka CHOGM.

The Heads of Government had agreed that they would formally adopt at their meeting the next morning the text of the agreement they had reached earlier in their meeting on that significant Sunday. But later that day, just before they entered the Anglican Cathedral for a service, Sonny learned that the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, had informed Prime Minister Thatcher that the Australian media accompanying Prime Minister Fraser had got wind of the content of the agreement and advised her that it would be very damaging if the British media who were bound to get it from their Australian colleagues were to publish it before its formal adoption.

So while the Archbishop of Lusaka was preaching his sermon from the pulpit, Sonny used his service programme to write a note to Mrs Thatcher proposing that Heads of Government should use the opportunity of the barbeque dinner later that evening to which they were all invited by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser to adopt the text of the agreement. This was how the agreement was saved.

The apartheid policy which led the Government of South Africa to leave the Commonwealth in 1961 had because of the attitude of the oldest members of the Commonwealth to apartheid South Africa, remained an existential threat to the Association.

At their meeting in November 1985 in The Bahamas, Commonwealth Heads of Government agreed that the Secretary-General should organize a group of eminent persons from seven named member countries to go to South Africa (EPG) to promote dialogue between the apartheid government and its opponents. Soon after the CHOGM, following a front page article in the prominent British newspaper, The Observer, that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was contemplating having the then British Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe, as chairman of the group, the Presidents of the two African members of the group, Tanzania and Nigeria threatened to pull out of the group which would have meant the end of the initiative.

Sonny Ramphal then sent me to Dar es Salaam and Lagos to assure Presidents Nyerere and Babangida that he was going to appoint Mr Malcolm Fraser and General Obasanjo, a former head of Nigeria's military government, as co-chairmen of the EPG. And

subsequently, when the EPG after its unsuccessful effort to persuade South Africa's President P W Botha to enter into dialogue with his country's opponents of apartheid recommended that Commonwealth countries should consider implementing economic sanctions against South Africa, a recommendation that was opposed by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, it was following consultations between Sonny Ramphal and the Palace, that HM The Queen hosted a lunch on 4th August 1986 for the select Heads of Government including Margaret Thatcher at which an understanding was reached that henceforth enabled the Commonwealth to adopt a consensual approach to the situation in South Africa.

Earlier in 1977, at the CHOGM in Gleneagles Sonny Ramphal had got the Heads of Government to adopt the Gleneagles Agreement that regulated Commonwealth sports sanctions against apartheid South Africa. The sanctions remained in place until 1991 when as Sonny's successor in office, I led the Commonwealth intervention that effectively helped the Government of President F W de Clerk and the leaders of the other political parties, in South Africa's transition from apartheid to a democratic government in May 1994 with Nelson Mandela as the President of the Republic of South Africa.

The first Commonwealth Secretary-General, Arnold Smith, is rightly credited with consolidating the evolution of the British Commonwealth into the Commonwealth of sovereign independent nations as envisaged in the London Declaration of 1949, and also with the beginning of the formal articulation of the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth with the Singapore Declaration of 1971 which was followed by the Harare Declaration of 1991 and culminated in the Commonwealth Charter signed by The Queen in 2013.

However, it was Sonny Ramphal who championed the universal recognition of the Commonwealth as an organization with a capacity to operate globally in the service of the wider international community. It was he who gave practical meaning to the maxim: "while the Commonwealth cannot negotiate for the world, it can help the world to negotiate", as has been the case since the 1992 Rio Summit on Environment and Development and the subsequent United Nations conferences on climate change.

Sonny Ramphal will also be remembered as a great advocate of the efforts by the developing countries of the South to persuade the richer developed countries of the North to contribute more effectively to the development of the countries of the South. It was in this respect that he played a prominent role in the Brandt Commission that was set up in 1977 on international development issues chaired by the former Chancellor of Germany, Willy Brandt.

To sum up, Sonny Ramphal will be remembered as a man with great oratorical skills and wordcraft, as a remarkable Foreign Minister of his native Guyana and a great player in

the affairs of his Caribbean region, as a global diplomat who rendered enduring service to the Commonwealth, indeed, as an icon of the modern Commonwealth.

Finally, I would like to say this to his children, to Susan, Ian, Mark and Amanda, and to Sir Ronald Sanders his treasured son-in-law: I know that Sonny and Lois will continue to live in your hearts; I have no doubt that you will want to continue to remember the happy times you spent with them.

May their souls continue to rest in peace.

Chief Emeka Anyaoku GCON GCVO CFR

Commonwealth Secretary-General 1990-2000.

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