

**The 2025 Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture**  
**- *The legacy of Sir Shridath “Sonny” Ramphal* -**  
**Delivered by Sir Ronald Sanders KCMG KCM AM (Hon)**  
**At Marlborough House, London**  
**On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025**

A few hours ago, in the Queen’s Chapel’s serene and sanctified setting, a stately thanksgiving service honoured the distinguished life of Sir Shridath ‘Sonny’ Ramphal, the second and longest-serving Commonwealth Secretary-General.

We were right to give thanks for his remarkable life, in which he provided courageous and creative leadership to the Commonwealth, to which he was passionately and unreservedly committed.

Were he physically here tonight, he would have been delighted to see so many friends with whom he shared a common bond: to make the Commonwealth serve not just itself, but all the world.

And it is he who would have thanked you for keeping faith with him in life and in parting.

So, I thank those who joined us for the Service of Thanksgiving and all of you gathered here at Marlborough House—the seat of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the very workshop where diverse perspectives, open dialogue, and the free exchange of ideas have shaped Commonwealth thinking.

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I begin by acknowledging Her Excellency the Honourable Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey, our current Commonwealth Secretary-General, to whom I express profound gratitude for her personal assistance - and that of the Secretariat - in arranging both this morning’s memorial service and today’s Lecture.

It is especially fitting that a Ghanaian holds this post in the sixtieth anniversary year of the founding of the Commonwealth Secretariat, which we mark this month.

Ghana's visionary president, Kwame Nkrumah, first proposed the idea of a Commonwealth Secretariat in July 1965.

From Nkrumah's bold proposal to Botchwey's stewardship today, we mark sixty years of vision made real.

We honour the vision; we celebrate the accomplishment!

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And so, we gather for the annual Memorial Lecture in honour of Patsy Robertson—an indomitable Commonwealth figure in her own right.

Patsy was the founding spirit and first chair of the Commonwealth Association.

Her belief in the Commonwealth was unshakeable, and her passion for promoting its relevance, unwavering.

She led the Secretariat's public information efforts for many years—and, behind the scenes, served as the private, trusted voice of the Secretariat in its dealings with media across our nations.

She patiently explained policies, offered background briefings that advanced Commonwealth cohesion, and underscored our shared values.

When she died in August 2020, Sir Shridath Ramphal paid this tribute:

“The Commonwealth sky has clouded over... She had given her life to the Commonwealth—from the Secretariat's beginning to her own end... May the Commonwealth fulfil the highest purposes to which she dedicated her life.”

Patsy would have been the first to approve focusing this year's Lecture on the man she served and admired for fifteen years:

Sir Shridath “Sonny” Ramphal—his life, his leadership, and the lessons we draw from his legacy.

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It is a profound privilege for me to have been asked to deliver the Patsy Robertson Memorial Lecture, focusing on lessons from the legacy of Sir Shridath Ramphal as Secretary-General.

In the ten months since his passing, I have been invited to write and speak on several occasions about his life and legacy.

While I have done so, not once have I felt able to capture them fully, for his pursuits and accomplishments surpassed what most could achieve in a single lifetime.

He was a Guyanese loyalist, a Caribbean patriot, a Commonwealth devotee, and a confirmed internationalist.

And in each of these spheres, he made outstanding contributions.

Malcolm Fraser, the former Prime Minister of Australia, said of Sonny:

“He understood the principles which were important to the strength and unity of the Commonwealth. He made sure the Commonwealth adhered to those principles. He is a man among men.”

### **Sonny Ramphal - the man**

Let us look for a moment at Sonny Ramphal — the man, before the statesman.

Shridath ‘Sonny’ Ramphal’s life was one foretold — in a way both special and quietly prophetic.

In 1929, before his first birthday, a moment occurred that seemed to foreshadow the remarkable life ahead.

Reverend C. F. Andrews, a close disciple and trusted friend of Mahatma Gandhi, visited British Guiana at Gandhi’s request.

During his visit, he found himself in the humble home of James and Grace Ramphal.

There, the infant Sonny — restless and unsettled — caught his eye.

Reverend Andrews lifted the child, gazed into his eyes, and declared with certainty: ‘This child will have a long and rewarding life.’

And so, it proved to be.

From these modest beginnings, Sir Shridath Ramphal rose to touch the lives of nations and inspire millions.

Born on October 3, 1928, in a British Guiana still bound by the chains of colonialism, he would come to embody a profound commitment to justice, fairness, and hope.

Though I knew him personally and intimately — as his son-in-law for 50 years, and professionally as Antigua and Barbuda’s High Commissioner to London and Ambassador in other theatres — I found, in preparing this Lecture, that I was still amazed by all he achieved in a single lifetime.

### **Ramphal – the Internationalist**

He received the highest honours from 21 individual countries and from all 15 Caribbean Community nations collectively, as well as honorary degrees from 28 universities, including Cambridge, London, and Oxford.

He also served as Chancellor of three universities—the University of Guyana, the University of the West Indies, and the University of Warwick—spending over a decade at both UWI and Warwick.

Never content with a ceremonial title, as Chancellor of these Universities, he quietly enriched every council meeting with his legal expertise and global experience, always respectful of the Vice-Chancellors’ autonomy yet ready to guide and inspire.

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Exceptionally, he was the only person to serve on all four of the major international commissions of the 1980s that helped shape global discourse and policy on development and cooperation, environment and sustainability, disarmament and security, and humanitarian issues.

And, all this while being an active and involved Secretary-General of the Commonwealth.

Where did he find the energy, stamina, and dedication to work diligently and to excel in every forum?

It was his character: a fierce urgency to make change for the better, always driven to ensure that progress would reach the greatest number—and endure.

All those who laboured with him knew of his capacity to work late into the night, only to emerge the following morning with the draft of a solution to the previous day’s seemingly insurmountable issue.

“Words have weight,” he said time and again.

“Weigh the use of each one carefully – they make a huge difference to outcomes.”

That care and unyielding dedication ensured that every initiative he championed delivered broad, lasting impact and stood the test of time.

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The work of those four global Commissions also resonates almost three decades later.

Witness the erosion of the rules-based order and the UN Security Council’s paralysis in preventing aggression and upholding international peace and security.

But of all his commissions, which moved governments from division to consensus and common sense, none is more relevant to today’s Commonwealth than the Commission on Environment and Development.

Though there are deniers, Climate Change poses the greatest threat to all mankind.

The Commonwealth’s small island states feel its first and fiercest blows, but its impacts are now unmistakable across every continent.

In all of these commissions, whose members brought diverse and often conflicting perspectives, Sonny carried the unique gift for which he was well known: the ability to reconcile even the most hostile approaches.

These recognitions affirmed his status as a true global citizen, admired for his unique contributions to humanity.

In his work, he personified the quality of “a healing touch.”

### **The Commonwealth and a healing touch**

He aspired for the Commonwealth to embody that same healing spirit — a lesson he drew from Jawaharlal Nehru, who, at India’s independence, believed that the country needed a healing touch and a secular policy of reconciliation among its many faiths.

It was that same healing touch that moved him, in 1989, to encourage Benazir Bhutto — the young new leader of Pakistan — to seek re-entry into the Commonwealth, after a 12-year absence; and to urge Rajiv Gandhi, India’s equally youthful leader, to welcome her initiative.

In doing so, Sonny succeeded in bringing back into the modern Commonwealth two of its founding members — neighbours who were instrumental in its creation.

But as he said in 2009 — in words that still ring true today:

“The Commonwealth’s work in this area is by no means done.”

Contentious issues, rooted in historical circumstances, persist.

Still, the Commonwealth and its Secretariat cannot afford to remain distant from disputes between its member states.

Without fanfare or proclamation, the Commonwealth must always be ready to apply its healing touch to help resolve conflicts and to sustain the peace on which human progress depends.

That was a point on which Sonny was clear.

As he said in 1985:

‘One of the functions of the Commonwealth is not to displace the UN but to help the UN to realise its goals by keeping the lines of communication open’.

That was integral to his often-repeated mantra that: While the Commonwealth cannot negotiate for the world, it can help the world to negotiate.

### **Can the Commonwealth truly help the world to negotiate?**

The question arises — and it is one that supporters of the Commonwealth should not avoid: Can the Commonwealth truly help the world to negotiate?

This question—and one supporters must confront—cuts to our very purpose.

David Lawrence, writing a commentary for Chatham House, recently observed that:

“The Commonwealth’s breadth—rich and poor, north and south, ethnically diverse—makes it more interesting than many other multilateral bodies such as the G7, NATO, and the European Union.”

Yet he faults the Commonwealth for an “unclear purpose” and argues that its diversity “means consensus is often impossible on global issues.”

However, his narrow view ignores seventy-six years of voluntary association among Commonwealth nations—and the cooperation, collaboration, and shared effort that have yielded real, positive results.

Consensus will not follow on every matter—no more so than when we united to end racism and *apartheid* in Southern Africa—but who today doubts we did the right thing?

Who questions the courageous stand taken by black, brown, and white Commonwealth countries against an egregious evil?

Yes, we must attend to trade, aid, and migration.

But never at the expense of our most vital attribute: representing the peoples of almost one-third of the United Nations.

Especially now, as powerful states undermine the rules-based trading system, tighten migration controls, restrict multilateral aid, and retreat from collective cooperation, our voluntary bond has never been more important.

The Commonwealth is not a treaty-bound cartel; it is a voluntary association rooted, for the most part, in shared history and legal traditions.

Each member pursues its own aspirations, yet all recognize challenges—climate change, pandemics, transnational crime—that no nation can confront alone.

If Sonny were here, he would say without hesitation that this is why the Commonwealth remains vital; that it is its true purpose – to take the road least walked to find solution from which all humanity can advance.

And it is not just governments: more than 90 NGOs, representing millions, subscribe to that idea —working daily across human rights, law, health, education, sustainable development, and youth engagement.

The Commonwealth is indeed inter-governmental cooperation—but above all, it is a living bond between people, united by common ideals and a shared commitment to a better world.

## **The role of the Secretary-General**

Sonny Ramphal rejected the notion of the Secretary-General as a silent clerk.

To him, it was an activist's platform to launch bold ideas that empowered Heads of Government to change the world.

At the same time, he knew the value of alliances.

He built trust across "white, black, and brown" leadership so his initiatives carried genuine weight, yet he never lost sight of the office's formal limits.

When New Zealand's Prime Minister Robert Muldoon bristled at Sonny's push to enforce the 1977 Gleneagles Agreement against apartheid—calling him "more General than Secretary"—it crystallised that tension.

Muldoon expected a neutral administrator; he found instead a principled campaigner, faithful to the principles of the Commonwealth.

That balance between daring initiative and deference to mandate defined Sonny's tenure.

He wielded every tool to ensure the Commonwealth spoke with moral clarity while preserving unity through patient, judicious coalition-building.

It was a lesson he taught me personally in my own diplomatic life.

On every occasion that I talked with him about initiatives I wanted to take in Organisations to which I serve as Ambassador, his first question was:

Have you built the support?

## **Ramphal and the Secretariat**

When Sonny Ramphal arrived at Marlborough House in 1975, he carried a vision that stretched far beyond Britain's old Commonwealth.

Over the next fifteen years—longer than his predecessors or successors—he reshaped the Commonwealth into a genuine moral force.

Above all, he believed that the Commonwealth must remain true to its ideals, and he lived that conviction through three core commitments: ending racism and institutionalizing social justice, equitable development, and principled multilateralism.



He guided the Commonwealth through the final stages of decolonisation—in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific—always insisting that the rights of newly independent states be respected and their special circumstances be addressed.

He sensed the mounting threat to our planet long before it entered the public conscience, championing environmental stewardship when few would listen.

For Sonny, the Secretariat was far more than a bureaucracy; it was “an intellectual hub” worthy of helping the world negotiate its future.

To prove it, he first attracted the brightest minds to Marlborough House—many of whom are here tonight – some physically, others in spirit.

Then, between 1984 and 1990, he institutionalised expertise on the era’s defining challenges.

After the 1983 intervention in Grenada, he commissioned a study on small-state vulnerability that reshaped discussions at the UN, the World Bank, and the IMF.

In 1984, scholars from Ghana, India, and Barbados produced the Commonwealth Study on Debt and Development, which directly influenced the World Bank’s 1985 Structural Adjustment review.

A 1987 Environmental Assessment, led by experts from Australia, Canada, and Jamaica, laid the groundwork for Small Island Developing States at the 1992 Earth Summit.

And in 1989, under Martin Holdgate’s chairmanship, the Expert Group on Global Warming issued one of the earliest international warnings about sea-level rise, foretelling what we now recognise as “climate change bearing down disproportionately on the world’s poorest people.”

Through every initiative, Sonny’s guiding faith was in the oneness of humanity.

He rejected any notion of otherness or racial superiority.

He insisted that, so long as we honoured our shared ideals, the Commonwealth could help the world negotiate a fairer, more sustainable future.

His legacy challenges us to match his intellectual rigor and moral clarity as we confront a new age of global conflicts and economic uncertainty.

### **Ramphal and ending racism and birthing Zimbabwe**

Sonny's lineage embodied the Commonwealth's complex history: he was the descendant of an enslaved African woman and her white slave owner on one branch of his family, and of Indian indentured labourers on the other.

He knew racism, exploitation, and injustice firsthand.

So when he took office as Commonwealth Secretary-General in 1975, confronting racism in Southern Africa was his natural first task.

In 1977 at Ottawa, every Head of Government—except the United Kingdom—condemned Ian Smith's white-minority regime in Southern Rhodesia.

Two years later in Lusaka, they united behind the demand for “one person, one vote,” forcing the Lancaster House Conference and paving the way for Zimbabwe's independence in 1980.

All the while, Sonny stood firm against the iron will of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington.

Drawing on his sharp legal mind and extraordinary negotiating skill, he guided African leaders toward an independence constitution enshrining “one man, one vote.”

That triumph toppled Ian Smith's regime and began restoring rights to Zimbabwe's native majority.

He lamented what followed under Robert Mugabe—repression of political opponents, Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth, and its eventual withdrawal.

Sonny believed those tragedies sprang from broken promises:

Britain's failure to fund land redistribution for the landless majority, and Mugabe's own shortcomings on governance.

As he put it,

“Had the commitments made on land and governance been respected and fulfilled, Zimbabwe today would not be the casualty it is.”

Sonny’s steadfast commitment to justice in Southern Africa sprang from personal experience and unshakeable principle—a lesson that continues to guide the Commonwealth today.

### **Ramphal and *apartheid***

From 1975 to 1990, as Secretary-General, Sonny kept the Commonwealth’s voice unyielding against South African apartheid—imposing travel bans, suspending sporting ties, and backing UN sanctions.

In 1988, he established the Eminent Persons Group and sent them to South Africa. Their report laid bare the regime’s inhumanity and warned of graver suffering unless it was dismantled—and called for Nelson Mandela’s unconditional release.

Sonny published that report as a book; it became a bestseller and galvanised citizen action worldwide.

The following year, he published another report as a book – The Sanctions Report prepared for the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on Southern Africa.

In its Introduction, that report made what would have been a startling statement at the time:

“Exhortation will never end Apartheid,

Even diplomatic pressure will not be enough.

Economic pressure will be needed before the white minority yields its monopoly of power”.

Nelson Mandela endorsed that statement from his prison cell.

Sonny became the advocate for sanctions, remarking that:

“Human solidarity with the victims and opponents of apartheid in South Africa is what will ensure one day a free, non-racial, democratic society in South Africa, one in which all its people, black and white, will dwell in freedom and peace”.

He forged alliances with leaders from Australia, Canada, India, and beyond, even as he clashed with Margaret Thatcher's government.

His diplomatic acumen united “white, black, and brown” Heads of government around a common cause, hastening apartheid's demise.

On 11 February 1990—two years after the EPG mission—Nelson Mandela walked free, a triumph born of Commonwealth consensus.

When Mandela arrived in London that April, Margaret Thatcher invited him to Downing Street, but his first call was not to the Prime Minister's residence—it was to Sonny's home.

As Mandela later said of Sonny:

“He is one of those men who have become famous because, in their fight for human justice, they have chosen the whole world as their theatre.”

This was Sonny's Commonwealth in action: principled, proactive, and united in pursuing justice.

### **Ramphal and Retreats of CHOGM**

Sonny placed great importance on Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings—not merely convening them but ensuring that Heads wanted to attend and found real value in their deliberations.

He knew these gatherings had to produce outcomes that strengthened member countries and served the world, remaining relevant and resonant for people everywhere.

To preserve focus and frank dialogue, he instituted the “retreat” mechanism—intimate, two-day sessions for Heads and the Secretary-General alone, zeroing in on the most urgent issues.

As membership grew, full plenaries became cumbersome and lost the candid spirit of earlier, smaller meetings.

The retreat was his remedy.

Since 1990, however, the time allotted for retreats has steadily shrunk.

We should redouble our efforts—extending these sessions and keeping their agendas sharply current, as recommended by the 2011 Eminent

Persons Group report, “A Commonwealth of the People: Time for Urgent Reform,” on which I served as a member and rapporteur.

Consider the results of just two retreats:

Ottawa, 1982: In two days, Heads of Government alone produced the Ottawa Declaration on Debt Relief and Development—the foundation of every Commonwealth debt campaign since.

Nassau, 1985: A similar retreat forged tougher sanctions on South Africa and new pledges for environmental cooperation among small states.

By owning their decisions in private, leaders implemented them with swift resolve.

If we ask how Sonny turned “help the world negotiate” into concrete action, these retreats provide the answer.

They show how the Commonwealth can shape global outcomes—and offer a blueprint we must revive and apply today.

### **Ramphal on Human Rights and Backsliding on Democracy**

Sonny firmly believed the Commonwealth’s authority rested on more than shared history; it depended on shared values—above all, human rights and democratic accountability.

Long before the creation of any formal sanctions mechanism, such as the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, he used the retreat format at the 1977 CHOGM to urge Heads of Government to break new ground by condemning Idi Amin’s inhumanities in Uganda.

That was a daring move—directly challenging the cloak of “non-interference” that rogue regimes still invoke today.

As he declared, Commonwealth Heads must “speak out in condemnation of what is regarded as tyranny, whether the origins were in a black or white leadership.”

His insistence that “we must be consistent” transformed that communiqué into a powerful statement of principle and set a new benchmark for international accountability.

Determined to move beyond ad hoc denunciations, Sonny secured at the 1981 CHOGM a mandate to establish a dedicated Human Rights Unit within the Secretariat.

Launched in January 1985 with just one lawyer, it became the Commonwealth's first permanent mechanism for promoting and monitoring human rights across our membership, embedding rights protection at the very heart of our values.

Under his watch, the Secretariat also launched its first Commonwealth election observation mission, ensuring that democratic processes received independent scrutiny and support.

Today, we confront worrying signs of democratic backsliding and restrictions on fundamental freedoms.

Sonny would urge us to remain faithful to the Commonwealth's founding principles by keeping human rights, democracy, and development at the forefront of our collective obligations.

### **Two important figures during Sonny's tenure as Secretary-General**

I cannot leave Sonny's Commonwealth service without acknowledging two remarkable figures he worked alongside.

First, Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Their relationship was often cast as combative—and there were indeed profound differences—but never without mutual respect.

When Sonny told her at Downing Street that he planned to step down, her first question was, "Must you?"

Later, at a private dinner she hosted in his honour, she observed:

"You and I have not always agreed—particularly on how best to address South Africa's very real problems—although we shared the aim of ending apartheid.

Yet even in our disagreements at CHOGMs, you always sought a constructive way to accommodate differences, and that has spared the Commonwealth itself any damage."

Those words, spoken by one of the most formidable political leaders of time, speak volumes about Sonny's diplomacy.

The other figure was Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Sonny deeply admired the Queen, calling her role as Head of the Commonwealth “a supreme success” and praising the “excellence” with which she fulfilled it.

While it is not proper to reveal private conversations with the Queen, I can say that she placed great confidence in Sonny’s counsel on Commonwealth matters and often relied on it in challenging moments.

Sonny also felt that residing the Headship of the Commonwealth in the Sovereign of Britain as a symbol of the voluntary association of Commonwealth countries was wise and practical.

As he put it:

“The formula’s tenets, like those of a virtuous founding constitution, are a heritage to be preserved”.

### **Ramphal after the Commonwealth’s Service**

Sonny left the service of the Commonwealth in 1990, not yet 62.

He could not escape the call to service in global causes, in the Caribbean’s interest, and for the territorial integrity of his native Guyana.

He became a member of the South Commission in 1990, Chairman of the West Indian Commission from 1990 to 1992, President of the World Conservation Union 1990-1993, Co-Chair of the Commission on Global Governance from 1992 to 2000, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance from 1995 to 2001, Chief Negotiator for the Caribbean Community’s external relations 1997 to 2001 and much more besides.

How he did all these things at such a high level, tirelessly and unfailing in his diligence, is a wonder.

But that was the nature of the man, as all who knew him can attest.

### **Ramphal and Guyana**

Even as Sir Shridath laboured on the global stage, his heart remained in Guyana—his birthplace and final resting place.

His love for his homeland was unwavering, and he stood as its staunch defender against Venezuela's claim to two-thirds of its territory.

Armed with a sharp legal mind, deep patriotism, and unyielding dedication, he guided Guyana through every twist of this dispute.

Sonny was the last surviving member of the team that negotiated the 1966 Geneva Agreement between Venezuela, the United Kingdom, and then-British Guiana—a framework for a peaceful, legal resolution.

His stature and integrity were such that even Venezuela acknowledged the creativity and wisdom he brought to those delicate talks.

Remarkably, at 92 and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, he became the first attorney to appear virtually before the International Court of Justice, representing Guyana on jurisdictional questions in the ongoing case.

His faith in international law never wavered.

On the evening before his brief illness, it was legal submissions that he carried to his bed for review.

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The ICJ is expected to rule on the Guyana-Venezuela controversy later this year.

He did not live to see that decision, yet to his dying breath, he laboured for his country's sovereignty and territorial integrity to be respected.

### **Challenges for Today's Commonwealth**

Three decades on from Sonny's tenure, the Commonwealth confronts fresh trials—each striking at the values he cherished.

Our world needs enlightened, collective action now more than ever.

It is only through cooperative international effort that we can show that invasions, war, and the unravelling of the rules-based trading system are not the answers.

The Commonwealth has an important role in addressing these issues.

Sir Shridath Ramphal's record stands as proof of what principled leadership can achieve: he expanded the Commonwealth's relevance,



forged consensus on the toughest issues, and gave voice to the unheard. He never doubted the Commonwealth's collective capacity to overcome injustice, inequality, and environmental peril.

And neither should we.

### **Ramphal at the end of a life of service**

I end by recalling that despite all the highest honours that were bestowed on him by nations across the globe and all the honorary doctorates awarded to him by the world's leading universities, he remained an assuming man, with a broad and welcoming smile and immense charm.

He treated the persons he encountered everywhere with the same respect he accorded to kings, queens, presidents and prime ministers.

He was genuinely loved and respected as was testified to our family in hundreds of messages sent directly or posted on social media platforms on the news of his passing.

I want you all to know that he died peacefully with his children and grandchildren at his side.

He loved and cared for them throughout his busy life.

He was a remarkable man.

And if I may be allowed a personal remark.

As he approached the end, I held his hand, and before he died, I was privileged to kiss that hand which had done so much to make the Commonwealth and the World a better place.

He fulfilled the prophetic words of the Reverend CF Andrews when he was still a babe.

He lived a long and rewarding life, and we were all the beneficiaries.

Thank you.