

**Remarks by Sir Ronald Sanders  
Launching “In the Ring: A Commonwealth Memoir”  
by Sir Don McKinnon  
former Commonwealth Secretary-General  
at the Commonwealth Secretariat, Marlborough House, London  
on Tuesday 26 February 2013**

No Secretary-General of the Commonwealth has an easy time.

Building consensus among countries large and small, rich and poor, black and white is extremely challenging, and, in the course of it, Secretaries-General are not only referees, sometimes they become the punching bag.

In this context, Sir Don McKinnon’s Commonwealth Memoir is appropriately titled: “In the Ring”.

The book is remarkable for its frank account of the events that led-up to Robert Mugabe’s withdrawal of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth in 2003.

Mugabe took that action when it was evident that Commonwealth Heads of Government would make the decision to suspend Zimbabwe following seriously flawed elections.

Inevitably, the Secretary-General was made the villain of the peace.

However, as Don relates in his book, his own reflection over Zimbabwe was more “in sorrow than in anger”.

No Secretary-General relishes the suspension, expulsion or withdrawal of a member-state under his watch.

And, Don bent over backwards to encourage President Mugabe to remain faithful to the Commonwealth’s Harare Principles – principles that were agreed by all Commonwealth Heads at a Meeting chaired by Mugabe himself.

But, no one is the more accountable custodian of the Commonwealth’s collective values than the Secretary-General. His primary touchstone is the values and principles to which all Commonwealth governments subscribe not only as a condition of their entry to the organisation but as a *sina qua non* for keeping such membership.

As Don rightly observes “the Commonwealth and its institutions had to be protected”.

Don’s account of his efforts to engage Mugabe even after he had withdrawn Zimbabwe is an untold story which deserves to be known. And, Don has told it with clarity but also with a sense of disappointment and frustration.

He has also not deprived his readers of an appreciation of the tensions that develop among Heads of Government in their decision-making on thorny issues.

That tension makes the Secretary-General’s job a lot harder, particularly when it occurs among the Troika – the three Heads of government – the past Chair, the present Chair and the incoming Chair. The Secretary-General has to look for them for guidance over how to deal with another Head of Government such as Mugabe who rode roughshod over Commonwealth values in pursuit of his own narrow political agenda.

This Memoir gives a full account of the tensions, the differences and even the vexations that occurred within the Troika.

It is a frank insight into the contest between efforts to preserve the Commonwealth’s shared values and the desire to protect a fellow Head of Government who had thrown those values to the wind.

If Don’s candid account of the tribulations that surrounded Zimbabwe is not a sufficiently compelling story of the Secretary-General’s challenging role in the Commonwealth ring, then his experience over suspended Pakistan under President Musharraf completes the tale.

As Secretary-General he was invited by the British government to the Lord Chancellor’s dinner for President Musharraf who was visiting Britain officially.

This was in the wake of the 9/11 atrocities in the United States when Pakistan had overnight become the new “best friend” of the governments of Britain and the United States.

But, at the time Pakistan was suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth over very doubtful democratic institutions.

Don did not regard Musharraf’s visit to London as a good thing. As he said in his well-known forthright manner, it would not have happened to

Fiji, Nigeria or Zimbabwe while they were suspended. It was, as he said, an example of one policy for the Commonwealth and another policy for bilateral relations.

He was then promptly 'uninvited' from the dinner, before being 're-invited' by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but placed at a table out of sight.

Quite rightly Don declined the invitation – he had “no intention of being a pawn in their game”.

This was not the only occasion when a government expected the Secretary-General to act in its interest.

But, as he pointed out to another government concerned about the Pakistan situation at the time, the Secretary-General “has to work for the collective Commonwealth good, not just advance the view of one country”.

Indeed, every Secretary-General, however deeply involved he was in the affairs of his own country and its interests in the Commonwealth and the international community, has to leave that baggage at the entrance door of Marlborough House.

He must become de-nationalised, colour blind, non-aligned religiously, and re-constructed as a Commonwealth being - whole and entire.

Don McKinnon became that body as every Secretary-General has had to do.

That was obvious when he angered some African governments over Zimbabwe, and when he had the courage to get between two ladies fighting for control of Bangladesh, and most tellingly when he told a senior British Foreign Office official, who insisted that Britain should always hold the post of deputy-Secretary-General that Britain was not getting the post nor would it be permanently on the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group.

Thirty-two of the Commonwealth's 54 members are small states with problems and challenges that are peculiar to their vulnerabilities and lack of capacity to stand-up to powerful organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

When Commonwealth small states were being pummelled by the OECD over 'harmful tax competition', Don in his full Commonwealth regalia – his OECD membership card as former foreign minister of New Zealand firmly put away - championed the cause of the Commonwealth's constituency of small states and curtailed bullying and an uneven playing field.

The problem has reared its head again, but at that time no one could have asked more of the Commonwealth Secretary-General

As a chronicle that is as frank in its content as it is wide in its telling of the inner workings of life in the ring of the Commonwealth, Don McKinnon's memoir is compulsory reading.