Nelson Mandela said of this year’s recipient of the Nexus Commonwealth Lifetime Achievement Award:

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

After reading law in London, tonight’s recipient held several posts with the government of British Guiana and from 1966, the government of the newly independent nation and Commonwealth member, Guyana. Subsequently he held the positions of Attorney-General, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Justice.

In 1975 Commonwealth Heads unanimously elected him as the 2nd Commonwealth Secretary-General.

Elected twice more by Commonwealth Heads of Government, tonight’s recipient served for 15 momentous years as Commonwealth Secretary-General – during which period Commonwealth membership grew from 34 to 49 countries.

The 1977 Gleneagles Agreement isolating apartheid South Africa from international sport and the Commonwealth contribution to Zimbabwe’s emergence to democratic independence in 1980 were high watermarks of his first period of office.

He played a leading part in the work of the Brandt Independent Commission on International Development Issues, the Palme Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, and the World Commission on Environment and Development.

In July 1987, he accepted the invitation of Julius Nyerere to join the newly formed South Commission charged with examining the major problems facing the countries of the Third World and proposing practical measures of co-operation to resolve them. From 1984 to 1986 he was Chairman of the United Nations Committee on Development Planning.

These notable works, globally significant as they turned out to be, do not by themselves paint a picture that does his influence justice. Perhaps his greatest achievement as Secretary-General was placing the Commonwealth at centre-stage of all the major global challenges of his time, creating and leading a force for good and a voice of the people – of the world, not just of the Commonwealth.
Under his stewardship, the Commonwealth tackled the global issues of poverty and development, of climate change and disarmament, of bridging the divide between countries of the North and South and seeking new paths for international co-operation.

He led an unremitting Commonwealth struggle against racism in Southern Africa and in particular against apartheid in South Africa. He led that struggle with political acumen and popular appeal – and with the courage and conviction to stand up to leaders when his moral compass demanded it.

Behind it all was a brilliant mind and an amiable personality. A man of significant presence he gathered a staff drawn from the best of the Commonwealth and he got the best out of them. At the Commonwealth Secretariat itself, he focussed on change and renewal – constantly ensuring that the Commonwealth was relevant not only to the people of its own member states but also to the global community.

One of his great legacies is the large number of people whose commitment to the Commonwealth and motivation to work for its causes he greatly inspired and through whom his spirit and work continues.

The Commonwealth owes more than it can repay to the tireless endeavours and creative statesmanship of this year’s recipient of the Nexus Commonwealth Lifetime Achievement Award: Sir Shridath Ramphal.