

## Transcript of Interview with William Smith & Fanie Pretorius, Pretoria, 11 July 2014

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### Mandela's first days in the office

- TT You said you tried to contact the ANC to see who was coming with President Mandela - did you succeed in contacting them?
- FP Dave Steward, my boss at the time, went to serve FW De Klerk in another office together with a number of our ex-colleagues. We kept saying before that, 'Please, all the staff here are wondering what will happen; will the ANC accept us; will Mr Mandela himself accept us to work in his office: yes or no?' He (Dave Steward) phoned me one day and if I remember correctly he said that Barbara Masekela had notified him that she would be in Cape Town the day before the inauguration and that I may perhaps be able to meet with her there.
- WS It was also so that we could facilitate to have staff in positions where there must be support staff - because we didn't know who would be coming with them.
- FP That was the second leg of our needs. The first leg was obviously to know: 'Are we acceptable? Would they go through a process of screening us; what will happen to us?' All the staff here in the Union Buildings had this in the back of their minds at that stage, so it was fantastic that Barbara was prepared to see me in Cape Town. I was told to be in a certain hotel at a certain time. It wasn't a hard and fast appointment, but I had reason to hope that I might be able to talk to her and get her guidance. In the end I was not able to meet with her.
- WS My recollection was that while you were there she was here in Pretoria, organizing the inauguration.
- FP The next morning I took a flight back and on my way back from the airport to Pretoria I listened on the radio to the inauguration ceremony. The day after the inauguration, the two of us here were very eagerly waiting to see what's going to happen. We then received a call from the presidential guard unit of the police informing us that the president is on his way. It was around ten, tennish.
- WS There was an important development just before that. We were preparing the offices to be ready when Mr Mandela was there, and there were a number of

issues: the cutlery that wasn't there and the machines weren't connected. But when we came in in the morning we went to Mr Mandela's office, and there was a young woman sitting behind the desk and we had no idea who she was. So we asked and she said she was part of a foreign affairs team which Minister Botha had negotiated with Mr Mandela or whoever to assist the process of coming into the Union Buildings. So we had a team under Chris Streeter of foreign affairs already in the building waiting for Mr Mandela to arrive and we had them between Mr Mandela and ourselves. That played out in the morning whilst we were waiting for him to arrive. When he came he found her in his office.

FP You can imagine, we were quite taken aback. We were ready to serve our new boss. That's all we were there for: to serve the president. And somebody else was there without consulting us or even telling us. There was another team from another department, sitting there prepared to assist Mr Mandela. But we kept our pose; we didn't hold it against them.

When Mr Mandela arrived at the back entrance of the west wing of the Union Buildings, we were both there, with quite a number of security staff who seemed to have arrived with him. At that stage the integration between the ANC security and SAP was still taking place.

When he came out of the car he recognised us because we were quite often present when he and Mr De Klerk had discussions here in the Union Buildings. He greeted us in a very friendly way but he was quite task-oriented as might be expected and he started walking towards his office. I remember he said, and I recall the words verbatim, after he greeted us, 'Well, let's go to the office'. We didn't know what that meant; was he talking to his bodyguards or to us? We quietly went back to our offices with our tails between our legs.

Within five to ten minutes I received a call from the foreign affairs staff saying that the president would like to see me. Someone must have told him I was one of the senior guys. The two of us were the most senior staff members that Mr De Klerk did not take along. I almost ran up the stairs for this wonderful occasion, but I was also anxious because of the uncertainty: what was I about to hear from the president?

When they let me into his office I saw him comfortably sitting at a table against the window, not behind his desk. On his desk he had two newspapers, one of which was *Beeld*, which to me was quite interesting, I wasn't aware that he read *Beeld* almost daily. And because I didn't do it at the back entrance, I said, 'Mr President, may I congratulate you on your inauguration yesterday.' He said 'Well yes let's sit down'. He started right away; without any small talk. He said, 'We know' - he always speaks of 'we', he didn't say 'I' - 'We know that staff here probably expect of us to get rid of them. But that is not the nature of

our organisation' - clearly referring to the ANC - 'We need your assistance because...' (and then he said something like 'because this is all new to us', but he used different words) 'and I want you to tell the staff here that if they do their work properly they must feel comfortable that they can stay and do their jobs.' 'But', he added, 'we do need transformation, things can't stay the same, there must be transformation', meaning that we must bring ANC people in as well. I said, 'Mr President I just want to show you quickly, there are many vacancies', (I had a diagram in front of me) 'we've got so many vacancies, in key areas, also in top areas of the establishment, that it will be quite easy to transform the staff composition.'

Then I said, 'Thank you very much for the kind message, I'll be quite happy to convey your message to the staff but obviously, Mr President, it would have so much more meaning if you were able to convey the message yourself.' He was kind of taken aback for a moment and he sat thinking for a couple of seconds before he asked, 'Well how long will it take?' I said it would take about 20 minutes to get the staff together so he could address them. He said 'All right, let's do that', and I said 'Thank you very much' and left.

It later appeared he had an important appointment somewhere. I still to this day don't know which appointment he and Barbara Masekela had to attend – (I think it was Barbara Masekela.) We then walked down the passage to room 145. I was one step ahead of them to show the way and I heard him and Barbara Masekela talking. I heard him say to her 'Yes, but this is important.' She must have told him 'we shouldn't have done this'. That is what I think she told him. He repeated, 'No, we must do this because it is important.'

When we entered, the whole big room was packed with staff. It included the few black clerks, messengers and cleaners. They were all there, the whole office, every single staff member was there. You could hear a pin drop. When he entered he looked at them and said, 'Well, I'm actually pressed for time, but I have to shake hands with each one of you', and he started from the left side and shook hands with each and every staff member. About a quarter down the line he came to a lady who often had a stern looking face, though she was a friendly person. When he took her hand he said in Afrikaans, '*Is jy kwaad vir my?*' and everybody started laughing. The ice was broken because he made a joke and everybody relaxed. He continued greeting the staff and then gave his message to them. Everybody was obviously very relieved.

He was Nelson Mandela at that moment: the warm, accepting and forgiving person. Everybody in the President's Office would have eaten out of his hand; there was no negative feeling from anybody in the staff after that, at least not that we were aware of.

WS It was the first day of the new president. All the communications people had gone with Mr De Klerk and the telephones were ringing. Everybody wants to know, 'How is the first day in the office of the president?' And there's nobody to answer the telephones. We were not in charge because we had that team between us and the president. We called SACS, South African Communication Service, to send some staff over to answer the telephones.

It was a difficult situation here because that very same morning Mr Mandela required a helicopter and then they'll tell this staff member from foreign affairs that we need a helicopter and then she would convey the message to us and then the helicopter will arrive. There was always this thing between us. In that team's period, there was always this interaction between them. There was no DG at that stage. Prof Jakes Gerwel came a week or two later.

In that period we had to prepare to go to Cape Town for parliamentary service. We had our own preliminary office allocations at that stage, so Fanie sent me to Cape Town to have a look at the offices which we had discussed with public works before. We had plans indicating where everybody would be accommodated, office-wise. I had to go and negotiate the process that would be followed when they arrived.

In that period Professor Gerwel was appointed as DG and I met him in Cape Town for the first time. I flew back with Prof Gerwel. I had the mandate from Fanie and everybody else to work towards ending the involvement of the foreign affairs team and I explained the situation to Prof Gerwel. His first order of business was to call in Dr Streeter and to say, thank you, that he'd been appointed now and we appreciated what the team has done and they could now go.

Going back to the evening before Mr Mandela came in, I went in to see if the office is fine. It was about six o'clock in the evening. As I went past the kitchen of the presidential suite I noticed boxes and looking in them I saw plates, cups and saucers and new coffee machines. When I asked I was told that Mr De Klerk took everything with him because it displayed the old coat of arms, and he replaced it with new stuff. The machines didn't have plugs, so I went home and fetched plugs from my appliances and took my daughters who were then in high school and asked them to wash the cutlery and put them in the cupboards while I put on the plugs so that everything is ready. You will recall that Mr Mandela often referred to the fact that when he visited Mr De Klerk; when he walked down the passage there was always a smell of coffee. The morning he arrived at the office there was no smell of coffee as we were distracted by the foreign affairs team and slipped with the coffee!

## HR processes

FP Regarding the staff establishment: There was a list indicating the vacancies in critical areas, like for instance HR. With the assistance of staff from the public service commission, Mrs Marie Vos of the department of agriculture (if I remember correctly) was appointed as head of HR. This took place virtually immediately, probably in the first week, because there had to be special arrangements (secondments) to deal with special circumstances. Then came the process of advertising those, and other, posts. Human resources was a priority, also communication and support staff for the president. It was in this HR process that Zelda la Grange was appointed as ministerial typist. She stayed in the employ of Mr Mandela until he passed away.

Actually, virtually all the vacant posts in the public service were advertised within the first three weeks or so, hundreds of posts, if not thousands.

The then Department of Public Service seconded three or four quite senior officials who assisted us with filling the vacancies in the presidency.

TT Why were there so many vacancies? Was it the change of government and people feeling they weren't welcome?

FP No, not at all. That is an important question. Mr De Klerk decided who he wanted to take with him to the new deputy president's office. Not only Mr De Klerk; Dave Steward as director general obviously played a major role in that as well. We were just informed 'You will go, you won't go'. Those officials moving over to Mr De Klerk's office created most of the vacancies in the presidency. One staff member – only one – said '*I can't do this* ('ek sien nie kans hiervoor nie').' And you know why? Not because it was an ANC or black government or any other reason, but because the office would from now on mainly be functioning in the English language. That was the only one that I am aware of who resigned at that time.

TT Jakes came about a week after the inauguration?

WS Yes. He was appointed, as I said. I met him in Cape Town and we looked at the offices. I flew back to Pretoria with him and we discussed this issue of the vacancies since we agreed that I should raise it with him if and when I had the opportunity.

TT Did all the senior critical posts come quite soon?

WS Joel Netshitenzhe started soon and Fink Haysom also. I always appreciated that Joel, given his stature which we were not really aware of, started as a chief director and functioned at that level for quite a while, until Prof Gerwel told Fanie that he should be promoted, explaining his value to the President. Fanie immediately took the necessary steps and it happened shortly thereafter.

FP Those critical posts had to be filled immediately, and then began the process of doing the other ones including the household posts. The process was interesting, including the number of applications that were received. It was literally thousands. It took the HR people a long time just to get through browsing the applications. Everybody wanted to work for this president.

### **Cabinet, oversight and coordination**

TT Nelson Mandela, in an interview just before his inauguration, talked about the matter of oversight and coordination of implementation. Your diagram of the establishment for the cabinet secretariat has units handling areas like economic, social and so on. Were they there before?

WS We were informed that Mr Mbeki would be dealing with Cabinet on behalf of the president. We had the first Cabinet meeting on the evening after ministers were sworn in, the day after the inauguration of the president. We have never experienced a change of this nature and I suggested that the president open and 'constitute' the meeting. I thought it would be appropriate and nice if the two executive deputy presidents made declarations of intent.

When Mr Mandela arrived, his bodyguard stood behind him during the whole meeting at that first Cabinet meeting. It didn't happen again after that.

Mr De Klerk made a statement and then Mr Mandela made a statement. He then declared the meeting as properly constituted. I've never seen it done before but it made sense to me. They then agreed when the next meeting would be and that it would be in Cape Town, ready for Parliament.

Then one of the ministers raised the issue of the two seats, Parliament as legislative capital in Cape Town and the executive capital in Pretoria. It was then agreed that it must be on the agenda for the next meetings. Two ministers, one ANC and one NP, both with Cape Town constituencies, argued that this matter should not be decided upon lightly. It then crossed my mind that the politicians may have changed but the politics on the issues leading to this compromise didn't change. It is interesting that at that first Cabinet meeting an ANC minister and an NP minister had common ground and raised this issue.

I suggested to Mr Mbeki, just before or just after that first meeting, that, if he allows us, we would write to all the ministries to indicate that Cabinet will continue business as normal, with the exception of cabinet committees. In other words, departments and ministries should submit cabinet memoranda to the cabinet secretariat as that will enable Cabinet to start being productive with immediate effect. This was agreed to and I think that was fortunate, because at the first formal Cabinet meeting they actually had memoranda on the table and was able to start with matters of governance from the word go.

We also indicated that we (the cabinet secretariat) would draft a memorandum explaining the Cabinet system that was in place during the De Klerk era. It served at the next meeting. I drafted that memo suggesting that they give it a go 'in view of the proven advantages of the system'. Minister Kader Asmal took exception to the word 'proven'. 'Who did it prove what to? We will decide what is proven!' We also explained the suggestion that Cabinet should continue without the cabinet committees for the time being. Cabinet agreed, and then decided on the membership of the committees. Ministries were informed about this and they prepared their ministers accordingly. It was also agreed that Cabinet will function in this manner for a while and that the whole matter will be resubmitted for reconsideration.

After a period we resubmitted the guide for the drafting of cabinet memoranda, suggesting that 'You have been using this guide for a while and you may now, if you want to, make proposals to change the format of memos and the functioning of cabinet committees.' Cabinet subsequently reduced the committees from six to five, if I remember. The only amendment to the guide for the drafting of cabinet memoranda (which conforms to most international practices and stems from the British system) was suggested by Mr De Klerk, namely to introduce a section on constitutional Implications. This amendment was approved.

TT After those first days did President Mandela relate to you directly?

WS No, mostly through the secretary of cabinet (Prof Jakes Gerwel). I however did interact with President Mandela directly before the first Cabinet meeting in Cape Town. I went to his Cape Town residence on the eve of the first Cape Town Cabinet meeting to explain the compilation of his files with explanatory/preparatory notes. He asked if I could join him for supper or dinner. We sat there and I thought, 'Now what am I going to say?' I began to explain to him how this Cabinet file works and then I realised he probably knows what's going on there, we might as well eat. Actually it was simple. The file was there and he was just talking and I had this wonderful opportunity of having dinner with him. I stayed for a while and he told me stories. And then I left. That was the most direct interaction that I had with him over the period until Prof Jakes Gerwel came and from then onwards I interacted with the President via Prof Gerwel.

TT In the case of corporate services was Thabo Mbeki interacting?

FP We knew from very soon on that Thabo Mbeki had a very big say organizationally, management-wise, but we never dealt with him directly. That was done through Prof Gerwel.

- TT I understand that De Klerk dismantled the National Security Management System which used to centralise and coordinate all government activities. How did that play out?
- FP Mr De Klerk insisted that this was a Cabinet government. Under Mr Botha there were 'desks' in the presidency for all the key sectors of government, staffed by senior officials. When Mr De Klerk came into office the desks were done away with and most of the personnel went back to their departments of origin.