

Transcript of an interview with Barbara Masekela, Cape Town, 28 August 2014

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Establishing his ANC office

BM When I went to work with Mandela, we had to come from the United States. I had been asked to be in the advance team because I had lived in the United States so I would be useful in preparing for his trip and he chose me to come and work in his office precisely because I was not around him.

After work when everybody went to his suite to eat and drink, I would just go to my room and continue work for the following day. And he noticed that. So on the last day he said to me, 'I want you to be there, you must come, everybody comes, why don't you come, so you must come.' So I went there and there was a moment when everybody was talking and he said 'Come and sit here next to me,' and then 'Why,' – you know how he was – 'why don't you like me?' So I said 'I like you' and he said, 'No you don't, everybody has been coming here every night and you are the only one.' So I said, 'Well, usually at that time I'm working, preparing for the following day, and I also know that at the end of the day everybody is very tired and so I didn't want to add to your tiredness.' And he said, 'Listen, I want you to come and work with me when we go back.' So I replied 'No, I am working in Nkobi's office.' But he said, 'No, I'll speak to him, I want you to come and be part of my office, I want you to run my office.'

So that's how I got to work with him. We were at the present Luthuli House when it was Munich Re. When we came back from the United States after he spoke to Nkobi I went to work there. He didn't have an office, he was being run by the entire NEC. Whoever had something said they are going there. I said to him, 'You need to have your own office, you can't be at everybody's beck and call.' One of the things he said to me was that 'You can say anything to me, and I'll never be angry with you,' And that was true, up until I left.

I started thinking of setting up an office for him. Jessie Duarte was working there for him. Jessie was really the person working in the office, but I came from an academic background, I had been teaching in the United States, I had been

in Lusaka where I was asked by Oliver Tambo to start the Department of Arts and Culture, to set up an administration for it. So, I'm like that, I like order and I like to be in predictable situations.

Clearly, the man had just come out of jail, he didn't know many things, he was a very trusting man, on the surface. I thought that we had a great task of preparing his office for Pretoria; that he had to have a group of people around him who were good administrators and organisers, who would make his life easier and also begin to introduce him.

I think, if I may say, that it worked because I was never personally ambitious. From the very beginning he treated me like a comrade and a friend that he could confide in as he did with everybody else who was working in his office. The remarkable thing of course about his office was that it was almost entirely women. And it worked very well because we were focusing on the larger picture of him being able to fulfil his mission, none of us were hoping to become this or the other through him.

I told Mandela, 'You need a researcher and we have to find you the best, I think we should bring Frene to head your research department.' We arranged it with Mendi Msimang who was still in London, and Frene arrived. And I got Beryl Baker, again I worked with Mendi because Beryl was running the office in London and I said, 'You need a proper administrator, somebody who will just be responsible for that side.'

We organised that there would be people who dealt with different things, Jessie for instance and me we dealt with his diary. I remember one time he asked me to buy a ticket for all his children to go somewhere, to arrange that, and I said, 'I can't do that, you have a social secretary at home. That does not belong here, it belongs to that structure, so I'm not buying tickets for your children.'

But this did not mean that I would not alert him to a certain thing that was happening which I thought would have political impact and as a matter of fact a lot of people came to me to warn me of developing matters, and I was able to handle that with him.

Preparing to be President

TT I understand you did a lot to arrange his interactions with people in different sectors of society.

BM Well, what a lot of people didn't realise was that he was not going to be the president of the ANC only, of the people from the ANC. He was going to be the president of all the people of South Africa.

I thought it was my duty to expose him to as wide a range of people as possible so that he can have as accurate as possible an insight into this society.

People would come to me so for instance this young man, Hilton Appelbaum, came to me and made an appointment with me and said that he worked with the disabled people, and he would like to see Mandela because he thinks that our campaign is not keyed in on how many voters there are in the disability sector. So I said, prepare a paper for Mandela with all of that and I will arrange it. It was a large number of people.

I was approachable and I made myself accessible to anybody who I thought could help Mandela. He appreciated it deeply, there was no self-interest in it. I think people forget how we were totally, totally focused not only in bringing about peace in South Africa but also on winning the elections, getting as much of the South African population to rally around the campaign, and I think some ANC people thought about ANC only, branches. They didn't think beyond. So, for instance, I was very heavily criticised, because I would let Mandela see anyone that I thought would help us in our cause.

There was this guy, Steyn, who was Secretary for Defence – somebody came to me and said 'This guy Pierre Steyn wants to see Mandela.' I asked 'Who?' They replied, 'Defence, it's something very important that he should know, and you must arrange it for the future of the country.' And I arranged it and explained to him and he was unafraid, he didn't have to get the approval of anybody to meet somebody and he trusted himself, and he knew that we would never mislead him. So I arranged the meeting which was held at Ayob's house one night. It was all cloak and dagger. Nobody in the office knew, maybe I told Jessie, and of course people in the NEC would get very furious about that, but I just felt that as a leader of the country Mandela had the right to know something. That would be during that time when we were already in negotiations, probably 1992.

The thing is also that I had been in some of these meetings like Dakar and I had met a lot of people from different races and I think also of course because I was more culturally inclined – and I spoke Afrikaans because I grew up in Afrikaans speaking family – a lot of people felt that they could come to me if they wanted to see Mandela.

Transition

To get back to his office I would say that in the beginning when I went to Munich Re [where the ANC head office was initially located] and started working there, there was no office really – there were desks and phones, and things were a little haphazard and there were not that many people around Mandela then, because you will recall, Oliver Tambo was ill, he was still alive, we had not even had our consultative conference yet in Durban. The observation I want to make is that as we got closer and closer to power, there were more and more and more and more people around Mandela, from our

own inner circle of the ANC. And it became quite torrid, because sometimes they wanted to see him more than he had time to see other people who were not ANC.

I worked mainly at the office, I never travelled with Mandela, and as a person in his office I would attend all the meetings so that I could report to him, as many as possible. Sometimes I think of this experience in gender terms; that often these things were not as transparent as they ought to be. As a woman with a family I would go to NEC meetings and think, people are really brave, but forgetting that I would go to the office having cleaned the house and cooked the meal for dinner and then when the meeting ends, I would go back home. But the men had support structures doing research for them and I don't think people are that transparent about where their information and knowledge comes from. In contrast, you would find people like Arthur Chaskalson who, when he spoke, you understood because he was at pains to be very accessible in his language, explaining how things work.

For instance: at some point after Mandela had said that I should be the mistress of ceremonies for the inauguration, suddenly a week or two before the inauguration, there was something going on about them wanting the late Judge Mohammed to be the master of ceremonies. It was a big thing. And of course my thing was, 'Hey, they can do what they like, because I've done my thing'. And Mandela insisted that he had said that I was going to do it and that is the way it was going to be.

One of the most striking things about that transition that I noticed, was the inability of our people to be good hosts. All those people were there, the heads of state, whatever, they were guests of the NEC and Madiba and this is where you would have expected that everybody would be engaged. But you didn't have that, I don't know whether it was uncertainty or inexperience or what, but people tended to be together talking to each other. Mandela was the only person who had that courage, he was not afraid to engage with anybody and find out what they were thinking.

During the period leading to his going to the Union Buildings, I had already begun to remove myself because I was very disappointed that I was not chosen to go and work at the headquarters. I was clear that I didn't want to go to Parliament, I had refused when Mandela and Sisulu wanted to put me on the list and I think it was because I began to sense the shift between the liberation movement fighting for liberation and gaining power – I was happy about the transition but I was not happy about how it changed the behaviour of people.

TT Thinking of the new arena from another perspective, were you aware that a team from foreign affairs was given the job of receiving him in the Union Buildings?

BM They had taken over from the inauguration because our people knew nothing about protocol and the ceremony. So from the very beginning Aziz and them worked very closely with the people in protocol. I imagine that protocol would have been the one to arrange what followed the inauguration. I was leaving, so I was not really interested any more.

What happens with that shift of power is that in a way you become unimportant. There I was, I had talked of this man every day, known at all times where he was and as we got closer to the election and after, I wouldn't even know who he was meeting where he was and to me, being head of his office, I found that a very frightening thing and dangerous because we were not out of the woods

When we were working in Mandela's office we never allowed him to say anything to anybody without checking with the relevant department. So for instance, if some banker wanted to see him about some plan that he had, I would say, 'Write a memo and tell us exactly what you want, because we want to get the proper advice for Mr Mandela.' And I would automatically go to the department, to Trevor and them to say, 'These people are going to see Tata on such and such a day, would you look at this and send Madiba advice about this.' Because he was quite impressionable, that was one of the things that was beautiful about him, that he did also think with his heart. So we were always concerned to know who the last person was he spoke to, just so that we could balance that, because under the circumstances everybody wanted to talk to him, people even followed him and waited for him in the toilet, in the garage, so that when he arrived before he goes to the meeting they should be there. And we were very wary of that, we did not like it in fact because we did not want any single person to have too much influence over him, we thought that as president of South Africa he must have a balanced view of what the facts were.

A good student and an inclusive leader

TT What you say is consistent with what I've been hearing, how much he was engaged and attended to things.

BM Oh yes, and he was a very good student, very good, because for instance for all the press briefings that he did, which were long press briefings, we worked for weeks on them, Gill and them, depending on the subject matter. They would get a team together and those people would brief him for a good ten days, they would go, spend six hours with him. That is the most excellent thing about him – he was a very good student and he had the gift of internalising

what he was told and to make it his own, which is wonderful because when people work with leaders they make fools of them by letting them babble about things that they don't understand. But Madiba insisted on knowing and understanding and he would study, he would have his little notebook at home and study. So when it came out it was perfect.

But also he would be critical, even with his speeches, he always changed things, not big things, he would change subtleties and say I want this like this and this word. So if you gave him a draft speech he would read it, he wouldn't make long annotations, but the ones he made were such that by the time he made the speech it was his own.

He worked very hard at being a president. He knew that being President was playing a role – and he was determined to play it well.

For me the single thing that I remember most sharply about him was his inclusiveness. And when I say inclusiveness I don't mean in the big picture thing of the politics, the races and all that, but to everybody around him, even in his office so nobody was so important.

What we used to do in the early times, I said that everybody who received and dealt with the letters to him, had to write a précis of each letter, who it is from, et cetera. We had a little form, to say who it was from, when they want to see him, what they want. That was a wonderful thing because it made everybody feel that they were involved, precisely because that would be part of his briefing when he came in, in the morning, because I said to him, 'You must know everything that is happening in your office.' So he would go through that.

He had a routine, but he also had silly things like he didn't want us to work after hours, he didn't want us to come in to the office before hours. He just had no clue about how much work was involved, that it was not a nine-to-five thing, you had to work all the time to keep up. I think that perhaps even during that period we were burned out, I mean completely burned out by the time of the election. But I think the great thing is that at that time neither Jessie nor I were eyeing any big jobs, we were just watching all these people running around. And I think it was a blessing that we didn't. It does make a difference.