

## Transcript of an interview with Niël Barnard, Gansbaai, 17 November 2015

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### Trust

NB Let me first say, what we must not do which invariably a lot of academic people try to do, is to put Mandela on a pedestal, high above mankind, almost a god-like figure, which he was not. If Mandela is to outlive his legacy it should be recognised that he is, as we all are, a mere mortal.

TT In your book you say that early in the discussions you and Mandela agreed that neither should undermine the other. Can you say more about that?

NB Let me put it this way, both the ANC and Mr Mandela at that time, on one side, and the South African government on the other side, realised that stability and a prosperous life for all were impossible to achieve without the other. That's the crucial point. There would have been no peace, no political settlement in our country without finding common ground on which we could agree and in that process from the very beginning Mr. Mandela and myself reached agreement on one point. Because the end goal was more important than anything else, we shouldn't try to play stupid, small games with each other. We shouldn't try almost naïvely to outwit each other; we should never lie to each other. When we disagree with each other we should put it firmly and even, if you would like to put it that way, rudely to each other – I disagree with your views. But what we will not do is to try to play some funny games with each other.

I think that that, to a certain extent, is a very attractive way of describing the atmosphere in which the discussions between Mandela and myself took place. It boils down to one crucial point: we have to trust each other. We could have played, he from his side and we from our side, all kind of games with each other – saying we are going to do that, whereas all along we were planning exactly the opposite.

I would suggest that one of the main reasons for our success, and let me choose my words in the following way, is that we were brutally, brutally frank and honest with each other: we know that you want democracy which in the end would mean majority government which surely would be run by the ANC as the political party, we understood from the very word go that that would be the endgame. But in that process let us be open to each other: we also have fears, we also have challenges, we also have problems from the other side, the government at the time. That was the basic backdrop. So, throughout the two years of secrecy and after that, we maintained, I think, a very high degree of common trust, let me put it that way.

TT The moments when he expressed anger were generally when he felt his trust had been abused.

NB Of yes. Oh Yes.

TT There was the CODESA incident when he felt that De Klerk had abused trust.

NB I know exactly what you're talking about, I was there. The night before the opening of Codesa there was a serious discussion in the State Security Council to say, 'How can we talk to people who in public still say that they will take over the country through force and violence? What are you going to say?' De Klerk was asked. And it was agreed, that Kobie Coetzee should talk to Mandela and tell him that 'Tomorrow morning De Klerk when he makes his speech at the opening of CODESA, will have to take a line, in terms of his own constituency, that the issue of weapon caches and the armed struggle is still not resolved – we will still tackle it and we will still have to handle it and find agreement on it. So you Kobie Coetzee tonight are going to talk to Mandela and inform him so that he doesn't jump on De Klerk tomorrow morning, so that he can be prepared as to what is going to happen.' - which in my view is a typical practical example of mutual trust - 'We are going to say some things tomorrow in public, but please understand the reasons and handle it in a professional, diplomatic way'.

To this day it is quite clear that Kobie Coetzee didn't do it, and Mandela, rightly in my view, experienced the view being taken by De Klerk – which was not as harsh as is sometimes portrayed – as meaning, 'My trust has been broken. If they wanted to say that, I should have been informed before the time', which as I've explained we decided to do, but it was not done. And for that reason, looking back, the one moment in which we broke trust and the balance of forces moved to the ANC, was that attack by Mandela at the opening of Codesa. He was devastating. I was there. He devastated government and De Klerk. He was quite good. And it was also because of a breach of trust.

TT He hadn't planned it.

NB Oh yes, off the cuff. It was typical Mandela. Why did he do it that way? In my experience of him, it was his personality. In his mind, 'We have been working together, we have been striving together to get the country out of this crisis, civil war almost, and here they come, the government, without warning me, attacking me in that way. It's a breach of trust'. Mandela could argue with you and differ with you on many issues, but if you have reached an agreement and broken it yourself, broken trust, in Mandela's personality that was unforgivable. Looking back I have no problem that he acted in the way in which he did.

### **Amnesty and the TRC**

TT Last time we spoke you named two issues about which you talked to him after 1994: affirmative action and the TRC. It would be interesting to know what transpired.

NB Can we start with the easier one, the TRC?

There is a history behind it. During the Pretoria Minute, Thabo Mbeki, Joe Slovo, Fanie van der Merwe and myself were instructed by Mandela and de Klerk to retire to the snooker room and draw up a common understanding of amnesty which would mean that we would bury the past right now, everybody would be free and there would be no witch hunt and we would just bravely soldier on. We drew up a document. We were all very upbeat, the four of us, and we were going back to the plenary to inform them we had reached agreement.

Then all of a sudden Kobie Coetzee and Gerrit Viljoen appeared to see what was going on. Kobie Coetzee immediately flatly refused that there should be so-called across-the-board amnesty. So I and Fanie took him aside and told him, 'This is the last chance we have to stop the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. If you want all the sins of the past made public – which I don't agree with – let's go on with it.' But the government refused that. It's no secret today, at that meeting Thabo and Slovo told us, if we don't accept it right now the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would be the end of it all.

You must understand that I'm not necessarily against the principle of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but about the way I knew it would be manipulated. And it was manipulated. I was there. I appeared four times before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for hours on end. It was a witch hunt from the one side, a one-sided effort and to this day nobody can convince me that it was the other way around.

Knowing full well that this was going to happen, I saw Mandela in his office on this issue. I told him in more or less the same words as I am using now what the problem was. But let me say that from the outset he was always very much against my view' He said, 'I cannot stop them, we will have to get the past out to cleanse ourselves, so to speak, from the sins of the past,' of which old Kader

Asmal was a very strong advocate. I told him, 'Sir, the only thing we're going to achieve by this is to cause resentment. There have been brutal issues but what is the difference between the security forces and the security police hammering and killing people and ANC fighters so to speak killing innocent women and children on farms. What's the difference?'

Then I reached agreement with Mandela and I took Johan van der Merwe, the head of the police, to Mandela and it was only the three of us. Formerly van der Merwe was head of the security branch, so he knew exactly what was going on. We went to Mandela at a safe house somewhere in Johannesburg and we discussed it. We told him that much as we understood the issue, it would bring no permanent relief from the pains of the past. We argued at the time, rightly or wrongly, 'Let's leave the past and look to the future and carry on. It's not only our people, we don't deny that we have been wrong, in many brutal issues, but surely you and your side were not angels - to a certain extent you were even more brutal - let us look at the Magoo's Bar bomb and so on' Let us let sleeping dogs lie.'

To the credit of Mandela, he never agreed with us. He said, 'Well, I understand your argument but I don't agree with you, we have to open up the past, we have to inform people what has happened, that is the only salvation to our problematic past, to start the process of healing.'

My argument to this day will be surely be that it didn't heal anything/ It might have healed a few people but it will always remain a very contentious issue. The fact is, Mandela never agreed that the TRC shouldn't carry on. That comes back again to the issue of a breach of confidence and trust - had we reached agreement at the time of the Pretoria Minute, I think the old man would have said, 'Well, let's get it past ourselves.'

### **PW Botha and TRC**

TT You mentioned interacting with Mandela over PW Botha's refusal to appear before the TRC.

NB Mandela was president and he was at Genadendal. I was phoned at very short notice and told the president invites you for dinner tonight, are you available. I said, of course, it's a royal command, nothing is more important than that so I duly went. We had a wonderful dinner and discussion, only him and me.

Then he said, 'Doctor, I want you to help me.' I said 'With what, sir?' He said, 'We must bring PW to the TRC. Every angle which I have approached has not worked. Are you willing to talk to him, to convince him to come to the TRC?' And I answered, 'No, Sir.' And he asked, 'Why?'

I explained, 'Because PW would never come, but even if he did, take a leaf from your own personal history. I can tell you what will happen. Even if we

convince him to come, you have been in a dock before, PW has never been. He's in that dock and you find one or two of these clever advocates trying to irritate him. It's not difficult to irritate PW, anybody can do it, and he starts shouting and cursing. What have you done? Leave the old man alone, just leave him. What do you want to achieve by, because that is going to happen, also through his own stubbornness, to humiliate him in public. It's like yourself, Sir,' – and that was I think the telling point – 'you became a martyr world-wide, an icon, because we acted wrongly with you. Don't create an icon and a martyr of PW. He has played his role, leave him in peace. If you handle him in such a way, with the television and so on, he will become a martyr for some right wing cause, leave it, just be quiet.'

He said 'Well, perhaps that's wisdom, but I am not able to convince my people.' And then I said, 'Well, Sir, I cannot convince your people, you'll just have to bite the bullet, leave PW alone, don't push him, it will take us nowhere. He has had two strokes and he is even more unpredictable now. So just leave the man.'

That was the meeting. I asked 'Is that the reason I am here?' and he said, 'Yes.'

We also had personal meetings. During the last few years of his life I never visited him again and the reason for that was not that surely it would have been impossible for me to do that, but I was of the conviction that he feels by now that he is happy, him and me know what has been done and let's leave it at that. So I will always have extremely fond memories of – I hate the word 'icon' – a singular leader of the former century, surely one of the best that this country has produced without a shadow of doubt. Mandela was just a phenomenal charismatic leader.

### **Affirmative action and reconciliation**

TT You raised the issue of affirmative action with Mandela. What was his response?

NB His response on affirmative action was, 'You know it will have to happen,' and my response was that 'Yes, sir, it must happen but it must be done in a balanced way.' He said, 'Yes, we will see to it that it happens that way. Barnard you are listening too much to the hotheads in my organisation, please calm down.' I was always very emotional about, and I am still to this day, because I told him, 'Sir, it's not about Afrikaner people only, I am Afrikaner and I always will be, but through them the living standard of all South Africans will be lifted.' While Mandela was there the role white people and Afrikaners in particular could play was not an issue in Mandela's head. We had quite a common understanding on that.

## Potential for civil war

TT Linking this issue to Mandela's reconciliation effort. Why did support for Viljoen and the idea of a volkstaat drop by the end of Mandela's time?

NB First of all I don't think Viljoen was ever as popular as people presume he was. Let me make a remark, Afrikaner people are believed to be these very Calvinistic old-timers, hardegat, who don't want to reform. That's not true. Afrikaner culture is a very reformist culture. The core of the Afrikaner people since the late 1980s realised and accepted that we would have a new dispensation and we would have to work into that, so Constand was not that popular. Secondly, there was huge pressure on him to use the defence force, to stage a coup. But he resisted, inter alia because we knew about that and we warned him, 'Don't do that, it will cause a civil war – the majority of white people do not support some elements in the defence force staging a coup. It will cause not a black-white war but a civil war amongst Afrikaners. We have chosen the path of reconciliation, let's go on with that.'

I know of no South African at that time and even today other than Mandela who had the charisma and the personality and the honesty to earn the trust of white people and Afrikaners: 'We will have to work it out together'. People trusted him, deep down they said to themselves even around braaivleis fires, 'We may disagree with Mandela but we can trust him, we have to trust him, he sticks to his word'. Nobody after him has been able to gain that kind of trust and I don't know if it will ever happen again.

The second issue is the humility of the man. If I may, I would advise very strongly when you dissect the personality of Mandela, he was a humble man deep down. With all his charisma, with all his strong personality, his strong beliefs, he was a humble man. People easily identify with humble people. They can be tough, they can be strong, but you must be humble with fellow human beings. You must handle power in such a way that other people can easily live with it, be it intellectual power, be it political power, the power of money, or the power of beautiful women. Power plays an important role in human affairs: how do you use it when you have it? In such a way that people can easily identify with that, easily live with that. Mandela could, I think to this day, rise up in the present situation in South Africa, and get South Africans to face their problems together. He would be trusted immediately.

Mandela would have been a towering personality in any period of history, he had the capacity for that. For him, it was at a juncture in history where he was allowed to use it to solve a deep, long crisis of mankind in the southern tip of Africa, and he did it in a wonderful way.

### **His worries about destabilisation**

TT He frequently talked after 1994 about the possibility of destabilisation and of people with the capacity to reverse the changes achieved. Some say he had an exaggerated assessment of the threat?

NB I wouldn't use the word 'exaggerated'. After 1994 the possibility of radical and or revolutionary groups taking a stupid line in this country had been substantially reduced. The crucial time was in the last six to nine months before 1994, mainly from the right wing possibly supported by elements within the security forces, especially the defence force, but there were also to the very last minute people within the ANC who did not believe that peace was the process. They wanted to ride on the top of tank, like Fidel into Havana, to the steps of the Union Buildings and say, 'Hurrah! Here we are!'

After 1994 I think he was always afraid that this new found democracy which we all believed in, was under pressure, that's the reason, I believe why he inter alia visited Mev. Verwoerd, why he acted in such a way in 1994 with the Rugby World Cup, and I can go on. He realised that it was not easy for the white people to give away political power peacefully. There is no example in history where people willingly negotiated themselves out of political power in such a way that stability could be maintained. He was constantly aware of resentment, perhaps, here and there, irritation here and there and he tried to keep the process in a balanced way forward.

### **Preparation for public administration**

TT Looking at the transition and the formation of a new state, it seems that less thought was given before the election to public administration than to the security forces where there had been interactions from early on.

NB If you use the word interaction, yes, there was interaction between military and intelligence and the ANC, but the main connection, the main interaction and negotiation wasn't at the military level at all.

However you make a very salient point. If you look back, the politicians in power, the National Party, were totally out of their depth in finding a settlement. Like all stupid politicians they didn't realise that in the old Democratic Party people like van Zyl Slabbert and some others could play a meaningful role in binding them into this whole process. No doubt, the old political parties within the old system were totally unaware, and even when it became clear there would be a settlement some time, they were too fat and lazy, like the old Romans of the Roman Empire, to sit down and grind it out and prepare themselves for the process.

Where we cannot escape severe criticism was that we had given the process of governance after democracy far, far too little attention – governance not ruling. We didn't prepare ourselves well enough.

There would be another argument, but I don't think it's good enough. There was a structure, before the elections, involving myself, Kobie Coetzee, Trevor Manuel, Zola Skweyiya, Patricia De Lille and Benny Alexander, and we were discussing these matters. The argument would be from their side, 'We are not going to settle that matter right now. First take the kingdom, political power, and then we will handle it when we are in political power in a way which we see fit.' That is a logical argument from their side. It comes back to the question of trust again.

We were on the whole, except for a small few pockets of capacity, as a country not geared for the process after the settlement and we shouldn't be let too easily off the hook, all of us in that process. We should have realised, while we will now sign a document and find a constitution, the real McCoy is the implementation thereafter and also the process of governance. It could be said with some justification, that 'You, Barnard, were one of the few people who had a long experience, and it could not have been expected of the ANC,' and I think that holds true: we should have done more.

For any peace process, there will never be a perfect settlement – but the challenge is how you implement the settlement. For that you must be prepared, People must be prepared.

If after all these years, Mandela and myself could have a few days with each other and the question was put to us, how would you have done things differently, with the wisdom of hindsight, I don't have the slightest doubt that the first and main issue from all participants would be, that we underestimated the difficulty of the process of governance. And for all our speeches in Parliament and all our high-falutin' policies, it doesn't produce water in the tap. We should have tackled that.

### **A listener**

There is an issue for which Mandela, in my view, should be given more credit. We all know that he could be extremely difficult when he has decided on a certain issue, he was hell bent on it. But on the other hand I found that even if he was very, very tough and convinced, I could say, 'Just give me some time to listen to me'. Then he would invariably say, 'I will think about it and next time we will discuss it.' Sometimes if you have a good argument he would have listened. Is that not crucial of leaders: you must always be open to factual, good and new information and adjust accordingly. Mandela was good at that, I think, very good. In my view nobody could become like Mandela if you don't accept that history is a constant flowing river of change every day.