

Transcript of an interview with Sue Van Der Merwe, Cape Town, 8 April 2015

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TT This is about Mandela's relation to Parliament, and in particular the ANC caucus, during his time as President of the country

Caucus

SV Mandela made frequent but irregular visits to the caucus in my recollection. And when he did, it was a source of huge excitement because he would walk in and everybody would want to greet him, personally, I would want to go and hug him! So he would have wandered all the way down from the Tuynhuys, through the Parliament, greeting everybody, and come in to caucus - always on time as far as I recall - and then there would be this long singing. It was a happy arrival. It was an extremely happy arrival.

And then he would sit quietly and listen to the programme as it was unfolding. Then he would say something, he would make a sort of statement - as have all the presidents since then. They are always asked by the chair of caucus to do that. And his was always very thoughtful and amusing at the same time.

But he also used the occasion to chastise Members of Parliament. I remember once, he chastised a very senior member for what they had done – and that member took exception, and was so upset that Mandela came back next week and apologized to the whole caucus because he had apparently got it wrong – 'I misspoke', he said.

Caucus was, and to this day as far as I understand, continues to be guided by the chief whip. The chief whip during those Mandela times was Comrade Stofile, Max Sisulu and later maybe a little bit of Tony Yengeni.

In those early years we had help from all over the world, including the British Labour Party who sent us two young men to come and help. They were a great resource because they helped the comrades organise themselves for speeches, for question time and so on because they'd never had this experience. So it was a very open time where everybody was welcome. We were looking for help. We were getting it from people who offered. Max, Stof first – but remember I was not there the first one-and-a-half years which was the prime time of his rule as chief whip - so then Max had good people around him who were pumping out stuff. We had media being developed and so on as well as help for backbenchers who wanted to ask questions but didn't quite know how, and that sort of thing. So it was quite a golden era but what happened was that none of that became institutionalised in the memory of the people that followed or in the office of the chief whip.

Mandela was very much an authority figure, he was just in another class because he was the first president; he was the beloved president; he was so human and it was a high, those first few years. All the time the constitution-making process was going on. Comrades were there till one o'clock in the morning in committees trying to finalise the Constitution, which was finalised a few months after I got there in May '96. And there were these late-night sessions. Cyril was running it at that time and one of Mandela's greatest assets was that he allowed people to do a good job. He gave them that space. And his inputs were often moral rather than detail. That's my recollection: 'We owe it to our people. We can't let them down.' All that kind of stuff that was said in Parliament on his death when Jeff spoke to in a very moving speech.

But the other thing about those first few years was that we had the cream of ANC leadership in Parliament. Cyril was there. People like Saki Macozoma. People like Ma Adelaide Tambo, Albertina Sisulu - senior, senior people. Andrew Mlangeni; John Nkadimeng was there before he got sent off as ambassador, and people like that. Parliament itself, the face of it, was completely iconic.

And that was the caucus. But I can't remember any heated debates about policy because we had not yet worked out how the caucus fitted into the constitutional structures of the ANC. The other thing was - because remember now the constitution making is going on - there was an ANC HQ up the road in Wale Street so they weren't operating only in Shell House but they were operating in Wale Street as well.

The trend became that ministers would come and present on their bills that they were putting before Parliament. Because at the same time as the Constitution was being made they were getting rid of apartheid legislation. They would come and present, then there would be some discussion and there would be the same people making the same points over and over again. I

don't ever recall that anything was changed as a result of a discussion in caucus.

Committees

TT: So was policy left to the committees to discuss substantively? At one caucus meeting Mandela said he wanted to interact more with committees.

SV The committees did play, and continue to play, a big role because each one had what we call a study group. Actually the study group is a mini-caucus. It's a caucus of the ANC members on a committee. And then they would meet together as committee chairs with the chief whip and work out the approach the ANC was going to take.

The committees held a lot of that power, and we had very powerful committee chairs too in those days. We had big people playing that role at committee chair level.

You got the feeling that Mandela cared about the caucus and although he wasn't; able to be there all the time, he did come and was part of the collective.

Parliamentary councillor

TT How did you end up on a committee? Was it a voluntary thing? Were you deployed?

SV It happened in different ways under different leadership. But usually they ask you for your preferences, based on your skills. And then they ask you for a number of things. And then they put you in the committee that needed that expertise or that needed numbers.

TT Mandela seemed to be very aware of what was happening in caucus but not through his parliamentary councillor, Kathy – he had other jobs for him – and yet he always seemed to know what was going on.

SV He came to Parliament more, he didn't only come when he had to. He used to come for special debates, to listen in on the debates. You got the impression he took Parliament seriously. He loved this Parliament. This was real Parliament. And then it got increasingly less real, the engagement between the executive and the Parliament. But he did care about Parliament, it meant a lot to him, I had that sense.

That parliamentary councillor position is very ill defined. It's very broad. And basically people who are there make whatever they want of it. Sometimes the president wants them there for some other reason. Kathy had an office in the Tuynhuis and he and Madiba would do their thing together, whatever it was. When I was parliamentary councillor [to *President Mbeki*] I was much more

involved with question time and the preparations for speeches and stuff for the president than my predecessors.

Issues

There was a confusion about the role of the caucus. A lot of people go to listen to what is happening. I always thought it should be there to give the marching orders: 'OK,' the Chief Whip would say, 'we've got the following bills, these are the approaches we are going to take in each of them, for these reason.' What I would think is that the link between the committees and the entire caucus should be much more defined through the caucus structure. If I'm not on a committee and a bill is coming to parliament, I've never read the bill unless I'm unbelievably diligent, because you focus on your committee. So the committee should be making presentations to caucus over weeks that they're dealing with the bill, but they weren't – sometimes they were and sometimes they weren't. Sometimes you'll vote on a bill not knowing enough, there were often controversial things, think of abortion, and it wasn't clear what we were all supposed to do. In caucus they would tell us you have to vote, and then the Catholics would go behind the screen and chat to the chief whip who would tell them to go and have coffee.

China

SV I remember another big drama with Mandela. It came in 1997, I think. Overnight he decided to cut ties with Taiwan. It was like a bolt out of hell. I can understand his reasoning, but the caucus wasn't brought in on that and I can't remember if he came to caucus for that exact thing. But I remember we were all gobsmacked because everybody in the ANC caucus had received an invitation from the Taiwanese for an all-expenses-paid trip to Taiwan. And there was egg all over everybody's face. Nobody really understood why, didn't understand the dynamics between Taiwan and the One-China Policy.

Seat of parliament

TT: Was the issue of the location of Parliament discussed?

SV That was also very hot in those early years. There were heated feelings on both sides. I remember him coming to caucus and saying, 'On the question of the seat of Parliament, I have a very strong view.' You know how he used to talk, he dragged it out, to give full effect to what he was saying. 'We have to think about this very seriously and I have had to come to my own decision and ...' I don't know what he said exactly but on and on and on. He said, 'I have a very strong view that this Parliament should move. And I think it should move to Qunu.' It was

hilarious. He totally defused the thing, because we were also being very heavily lobbied by the ad agencies that Pretoria and Johannesburg and I think even Bloemfontein had got together to give us all the paperwork, why we should be moving. But that's the sort of thing he would do as well. That was a very hot issue.

Gear

TT Another hot issue was GEAR.

SV I remember that. But you see Thabo was also leading that. Thabo was always there when Mandela was there. And he was de facto the prime minister for many years which is why I say it again: Mandela came in with moral rightness but that provided a leadership that was invaluable to us.

What he would do was, against huge opposition to anything, he would manage to get us all to see the big picture: 'We are required to maintain our books so that we can consolidate now; we can put the country on a stronger footing and in the future we can expand our programmes so that everybody is included – but we need to sort out the books, the country's books.'

And that is how I remember him, always with the big picture. And tough decisions did not worry him. He knew what his position was and he listened and he heard. Some people listen but don't hear. He listened and he heard, but he understood the right path.

So, I remember the caucus got a special briefing to caucus on Gear in a separate room one Saturday, from Trevor. And that's where he got the most flack. I don't think Madiba was there; maybe Thabo was. That was just before Gear was announced. Trevor was always very good at that. He did all the consultations.

Getting parliament established

TT On one occasion he says to caucus he must try to be in close contact with the portfolio committees.

SV I still think this issue is an important one where you've got a caucus of over 300 people, because you count in the National Council of Provinces, or the Senate in those days. In a small party every single body in that caucus of 50 or 10 has to know everything about every piece of legislation that comes before the House. In ours you only know – unless you're very super bright and super diligent - you only know the committees that you're on. And for us in the ANC that has taken the

power to the committees because that chair and the Whip and the committee members are making decisions on behalf of the whole ANC. And maybe he could see that happening.

In those early days it was difficult to get a handle on how we should be dealing with these things. Initially it was all about the Constitution. That I remember very clearly and that went very successfully. Cyril got it done, Cyril and Roelf and whoever was managing it from the other side, Leon Wessels. They had good people and they got it done in two years which was incredible.

And so who was looking after how Parliament was developing? Frene did a brilliant job. I had the hugest respect for her, still do, because she once told me that she went to Mandela when she became Speaker and said, 'Madiba, as Speaker, I don't know what I'm supposed to do.' And, she says, he said, 'Do not let that institution collapse!' As I say, under him, there were all these people helping us and we had resources from abroad to try and make this thing work. And it did work. We've still got our Parliament. It's got its difficulties now but she understood her role, I think, and battled through it, especially the first five years. Then she got a bit more confident and started making some of the changes. We were just holding on for dear life, making sure that there were enough people doing the right things to keep the institution going.

When you think of all the institutions he had on his shoulders, the Cabinet and all these other institutions, it was very important to him that the democratic Parliament worked well.