

Transcript of an interview with Dr. Chris Streeter, Pretoria, 21 January 2015

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TT What was the background to you leading a team from the Department of Foreign Affairs that served Nelson Mandela's private office in his first days as President?

Background to the assignment to President Mandela's office

CS During the Codesa process I had extensive engagement with Mr Mbeki as well as Mr Phosa and then other members of the ANC, and I reported to Roelf Meyer. I was a member of Working Group Four that dealt with the TBVC states and their reincorporation into South Africa. I was also mandated by President De Klerk to visit these 'heads of state' of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei to inform them where the constitutional negotiating process is; what the inevitabilities are; and that these 'states' will be reincorporated into South Africa. Not all of them were very happy. One said to me, 'Why can President De Klerk not talk to me personally about this? Why does he send you?' I replied, 'I just carry out instructions but you are most welcome to phone him. Some took it well; others didn't take it that well and just felt that they wanted to speak to President De Klerk personally.'

TT Would you have got a lot of resistance in Bophuthatswana?

CS Not resistance. Big surprise. I mean when you see a horse you know it's a horse; it's not a cat. And reality just tells you the facts. I was sent with Roelf to KwaZulu-Natal to speak to Mr Buthelezi because they had pulled out of the negotiating process. We had long discussions to persuade him to come back to the process, which eventually happened, I think it was September 1993. So Inkatha was then back into the process. Then came the April 1994 date for elections and the start of the Transitional Executive Council, TEC, in December 1993 – I was then assigned by Minister Pik Botha to be part of the sub-group on foreign affairs, the sub-committee on foreign affairs who then reported to plenary which is the TEC.

I was asked, being in foreign affairs, if I would draft a new foreign policy for South Africa - looking at the past but taking us into the future, which could be used as a discussion document and then taken to the ANC for further discussion before being brought back to the sub-committee for presentation to the TEC. All

that was done and then in March the process kicked in for elections, the logistics, which was heavy.

Also during the negotiating process, groups, Roelf Meyer couldn't do everything, and people would be asked if they would mind me coming to talk to them about 'Where is South Africa going? What is happening?' These were white groups, sometimes also mixed. Although this was also reported on the SABC news, it would be in a two or three-minute slot, which is huge for news, dealing with the day's negotiation outcomes. That made it quite difficult for the man in the street to understand such a complicated process. So I was one of many who had to go and speak to them, and the question was often asked 'Where are we going? Is this going to work?' And my answer was, 'I'm not a prophet but I can tell you this: for this to work every person in South Africa will have to make a contribution to national unity and national success, and support the government of the day'. Once you talk to the people in lay terms they start to understand what is happening and fears dissipate.

They needed someone who could understand that and President Mandela was that someone.

Assignment to assist President Mandela

In March I was asked by Thabo Mbeki if I would kindly assist President Mandela and his government in the first period until people get in their posts. As he put it to me, 'Remember we're a freedom movement. We've never been in government so please come and teach us the ropes.' So I said 'Of course!' And then came the process where I had to meet with President Mandela. Mr Mbeki said to me 'We trust you.' I said, 'Okay, even if I was sitting on the government side?' He says, 'No, during this whole process where we negotiated and I was sitting on the other side of the table we realised that this is a true South African that we can work with.'

At that point the inauguration had not yet taken place. I was then asked by him to please come and assist Mr Mandela. And I went over to his office and Mr Mbeki then took me over to Mr Mandela's house and that was before even he was in the Union Buildings.

I then arranged the aircraft that Pik Botha used for Mr Mandela to go to Cape Town for the session of Parliament that would elect him to be President. From his house we drove with his cavalcade and his escort - he had this big BMW, armour plated and all that. And we left Houghton for Airforce Base Waterkloof and we flew to Cape Town. On the aircraft it was him, it was me, it was Barbara Masekela and Zulu, a security guard. And while we were flying to Cape Town, Mr Mandela took from his pocket a cabinet list that he wanted to discuss with Mr De Klerk, the ANC list. And he discussed it with me and Barbara as if I'd been a member for 112 years. He asked 'What do you think, Chris?' And I said, 'Mr President Elect, to me it sounds fine. Sounds great!' And Barbara then commented of course more specifically. We then landed and there were cars to pick us up.

We had to go to the Bo-Kaap where was a mosque that he had to go and greet the people.

TT You said 'president elect' - was that not before Parliament elected him?

CS I called him president elect illegally! It was the 6th of May.

So we went to the Bo-Kaap and the people went crazy and of course, the kind of man he is, he gave the security people and the police grey hairs because he would break ranks and go and greet the people 'How are you? How are you? How are you?'

While he was in the Bo-Kaap I phoned Kobus Meiring, administrator of the Cape Province. We would have stayed in the Cape Sun but after I saw the attention that he got in the Bo-Kaap I decided it's not safe, it will not give him the privacy that he needs and I said to Barbara, 'At the Cape Sun the media will be all over him. Let's take him to where he's safe and where it's quiet. I will phone Kobus to find out if he can stay here.' She said 'Well if you can manage that.' So I phoned Kobus. He almost fell off his chair when I said, 'Listen, the president elect,' - again, illegally - 'can he stay with you and not in the Cape Sun? Here are the reasons.' He said, 'Well, well, well, well. This place is old, you know, and it's not fit for a president.' I said to him, 'It's fit. We want peace. We want quiet. We want safety. Is it fine?' He says 'Yes.' Of course I then let the police know that we are going to stay there. And I asked one of the other colleagues to phone the Cape Sun and cancel the booking. The media were waiting at the Cape Sun and didn't have a clue where he was going to stay.

After Bo-Kaap we went to Sea Point to the synagogue and the Chief Rabbi. He talked to them in his typically calm, factual style: 'not to worry', 'this is going to be a great country'.

From there we were very hospitably received by Kobus and his wife. This was about 6 o'clock in the evening – then ANC members arrived there for a meeting with him.

As you know, in the early mornings he always go for a walk. That photo of me with him was taken in the early morning when he went for a walk and he asked me if I would walk with him and I said fine. Now as we were walking he was discussing with me the parliamentary process. I had a copy of the programme, so I talked to him about it. And he asked, 'How do I salute when the national anthem is played?' I replied, 'Mr Mandela, you put your right hand on your heart and you stand at attention.' He says 'Thank you.' And of course that is the protocol way to do it. And from day one that's how he saluted, wherever he went it was like this and other presidents followed.

This was Monday 9 May before his nomination. But what was very interesting was how people came over while he was sitting at his seat in the National Assembly, came over to shake his hand.

Inauguration

During the inauguration, I was at President Mandela's side. Again Mr Mbeki had asked me, 'Please, stay on the side of Mr Mandela for this inauguration. Hennie de Klerk and other staff members, Welile Nhlapo and so on, they will be on the Union Buildings side, but you are the liaison between them and us.'

So we worked on the programme for the inauguration together. We did the dry runs and everything. But remember, we had never done an inauguration, not the ANC, not the government team. What we didn't foresee was what would happen on the day of the inauguration when we invited all the heads of state plus heads of government to come to a breakfast at the presidential guest house. Everyone had a cavalcade. These guys were lining up in Church Street like from here to the Far East. But what we didn't figure out was: if Yasser Arafat is here and he saw whoever, President So-and-So – now they're all in a line with protocol officers going into the presidency for the breakfast – they stop and for literally 10 seconds they say hello. That 10 seconds multiplied by the number of heads of state multiplied by all the happenings taking place threw us out completely with regards to the starting time of 10 o'clock.

There was no way we were going to make 10 o'clock. So I received a telephone call from Welile and he says, 'Listen, what are you doing on that side because look at the cars in Church Street?' I tell him 'I can't see the cars in Church Street.' He says, 'They are way up there. Half the people and their entourages are not yet in for the breakfast. What's happening?' I told him, 'No, it's taking place slower because people greet one another and I cannot say to Arafat or to Hilary Clinton or whoever was there, "Please move it, move it, move it – we're working on time here".' He asks 'Well, what are you going to do?' I said 'I will inform President Elect Mandela that instead of 10 o'clock, this inauguration will take place at 11.' He tells me, 'They're already starting up the aeroplanes at Waterkloof for the fly-past. There's going to be a big problem here.' I said 'Hang on.' So what we did was we stopped the cars coming into the presidential guest house area, the presidency, and we took them straight to the amphitheatre. We got those still in line to move in and we told the caterers that this breakfast is over in a half an hour's time.'

I went to Mr Mandela. He was in the presidential guest house, and when I wanted to go up the steps there's this American with plastic stuff in his ear who tells me, 'Sorry you cannot go up here. Mrs Clinton is changing upstairs.' I said, 'You know what? My president is up there. This is my guest house. You don't tell me where I go and where I don't. You see this pass? It's security approved. Please step aside.'

So he stepped aside and I went to Mr Mandela in his room. He was lying on his bed with his dark suit and his red tie and his feet that much off the end of the bed, taking a break. He says 'Yes Chris, come in.' I said, 'I have to inform you that for this reason we will start an hour late.' He replied, 'Not a problem. It's good that you shifted it one hour on because now everything can stay in exactly the same slot one hour later so there's no confusion.' I said 'Yes.' He then said, 'Would you mind going over to Libertas' – it still had that name – 'and

tell Mr De Klerk that he must take it easy, relax. It's going to start only at 11 o'clock.' I thanked him.' So I called Colonel Jacobs and said to him, because it crawled with security, 'Take me over to Libertas.' I got to Libertas, informed Mr De Klerk 'Take it easy for an hour. This is the reason for it.' He said 'Thank you.' End of story. And then we started the whole inauguration exactly an hour later.

First days in the Union Buildings

Before the inauguration I was asked again by Thabo Mbeki if I would mind to come and help President Mandela in his office at the Union Buildings. I helped him before Professor Gerwel arrived. So I was in a sense acting director general of the presidency until Professor Gerwel arrived. I handed over to him. I gave him a report.

The day after President Mandela's inauguration, I spoke to the police and told them, 'When the president is coming from the guest house let me know. I will meet him at the back door.' I was asking 'Where, is Mr De Klerk? Shouldn't he meet him at the back door?' Nobody was there. Neither Deputy President Mbeki. Nobody from the ANC was there. It was me, only.

So I went to the back door when his car arrived. Colonel Jacobs called me because I had a radio with me, police radio, to say 'They're leaving the presidency, they are now on their way.'

That's when Fanie Pretorius and I met, and Fanie was not too happy with me because I was issuing instructions all over the place, and he asks 'Where did you come from to give us instructions?' I said 'Just do it.'

TT They had not been informed.

CS After meeting President Mandela at the back door I took him to the lift and he said no, no, no, he would like to use the stairs. So we walked up the stairs to the first floor, took him to his office and when he came to his office I introduced him to the ladies in my foreign affairs team.

As we were standing in his office he turned to me and he said, 'Chris, I want to speak to all the staff members. Could you assemble them in the cabinet room? Will they fit in there?' I said 'Ja, standing, they will.' He says 'I also want to speak to the gardeners.' So I called Fanie and told him. Mandela then spoke to them, to us, and basically told us that this is his presidency; this is a new South Africa; and basically what he did was nation building already starting there. Fantastic speech to all to say, 'Work with us. It doesn't matter where you've been. Work with us. The people of South Africa demand a new government that will take them into the future.' And then we left and then we started immediately running around with the arrangements for the swearing in of cabinet ministers and the two deputy presidents.

Barbara Masekela and Jessie Duarte were there, the two of them.

Return to Foreign Affairs

So the running of the presidency at that point in time was my responsibility and the team of ladies from foreign affairs who were there to assist me. He did

media interviews which I arranged, and so forth. In the meantime we dealt with the programme of President Mandela and people who wanted to see him.

And then at one point Barbara Masekela came to me and told me that the morning when she saw the President, 'The President asked if you would stay on in the Presidency and not go back to Foreign Affairs.' And I replied, 'You know, can I see the president personally to answer this because I would like to go back to foreign affairs. That's where I belong.' And she says 'Okay'. So when I met Mr Mandela I said to him, 'Thank you very much. It's a great honour but I would like to go back to foreign affairs because foreign affairs is what I am and what I do. I was here to assist you. Professor Gerwel will be here on Monday. I will be handing over to him. Mr Netshitenzhe will be here, I think, on Tuesday.' So he said, 'No problem. No problem. Can I ask you a favour – would you mind to take care of them. I can see how you dealt with the media while you were helping me. Would you mind to assist Minister Alfred Nzo with his media because he doesn't get a good press.' I said 'Sure. No problem.' He says 'Go back to foreign affairs but assist Minister Nzo.'

So I went back and I said to Minister Nzo, 'This is the instruction I have from the president. There are three conditions for me to do this. One: you listen to me. Two: we are going to be very professional with the media. Three: there is no such thing as "No comment". If you accept that, we're going to make this a big show.' He said 'Sure, let's go for it.' And then I was with Minister Nzo all the time.

And when the OAU meeting of August '94 took place in Tunis we were called to Mr Mandela's suite and he said, 'I want to compliment both of you,' in typical Mandela style. He says, 'Alfred,' that's how he spoke. 'your media is doing very well. Keep on doing it.' And of course Minister Nzo's response was 'It's this slave driver.'

Media moments in Tunis and Riyadh

When President Mandela arrived in Tunis for the OAU and we were lining up at the airport, the media was all around us. And the Afrikaans media said to me 'Please greet him in Afrikaans.' When he came walking through with the protocol officers, of course he did what he normally does, he broke ranks. He walked straight to me and shook my hand and I spoke Afrikaans. When he saw the media he realised what it is all about and he spoke Afrikaans back to me. That was sent back to South Africa and these white people here couldn't believe it. It was absolutely, for them, a God-given gift to the future of South Africa. He was so sensitive to that. Immediately he picked it up.

Then we were going to India. He had to go and deliver the Gandhi Memorial Lecture. We stayed over in Riyadh in the King Fahd Guest House, I think it was called. What a guest house! The Chinese carpets were this thick. You could park two aeroplanes in Mr Mandela's bedroom. Everything was gold and green, green because if you look through the windows you see the desert. And the dining room had space for 40 people at these highly polished mahogany tables lined up there, and we were only four people. It was Mr Mandela, Mr Nzo, myself

and Zulu, the security officer. Just the four of us. His room had a side sort of office.

While we were sitting there they called us for dinner and he said, 'Chris, we can't sit at this table for 40 people if it's just four of us. Is there not somewhere else we can sit? Otherwise we sit here but it's a desk.' 'You can't sit at a desk to have dinner,' I said, 'Let me call the protocol officer.' So I called him and I said to him, 'The president wants to sit at a smaller table please.' He says, 'There's no smaller table. This is the only one.' And they set the table with one, two, three, four at this huge thing that looked like a runway. So I said 'No, I saw you've got a table in the kitchen.' He says, 'No, no, no, no, no, no. That's for us. It's not for presidents.' I told him, 'We want that table. We're going to sit there. Make arrangements. We're coming in five minutes.' They freaked out. They didn't know how to deal with it. So I went over to see if it's ready and we went there and we sat down. We had our dinner there. It had space for six people. And then he was talking about his Robben Island days. He spoke about his manuscripts and about the *Long Walk to Freedom* and so on and so on. They talked about some other meetings they had had in other countries while they were still ANC members.

Eventually he said, 'Chris, how many South Africans are there working at the King Fahd Hospital?' I told him 'Mr President, 127.' You know these things when you travel with the president. I said '127.' He says 'Let's go and say hello to them tomorrow.' I say 'Okay.' So after dinner I asked Mr Mandela – because that afternoon we flew out – I asked 'Mr President, 10 o'clock, would that suit you?' He says 'That's fine, whatever time is good for them because we are disrupting their work.' So I called the protocol officer and told him, 'The president wants to meet the South Africans at the hospital at 10 o'clock. Is the foyer big enough so that you can put all of them there in one go and he can just greet them?' He says, 'The foyer is fine. We can do that.'

Next morning, two minutes before 10, there's the black cars, Mercedes Benzes, motorbikes and blue lights. But the hospital is just here around the corner. So off we went to the hospital, arrived, stopped, go out and there were all the South Africans in a semicircle. He started on this side – it was a nurse. He said 'Good morning. I'm Nelson Mandela,' and this white woman responded and you could hear she's not English speaking. She's Afrikaans speaking. Immediately he changed to Afrikaans and said to her, and I remember well, 'So waar kom jy vandaan?' 'Boksburg.' 'Oh. Ek het vriende in Boksburg. Ja ...,' and then he gave the surname. 'Do you know them?' Of course she had to say 'No'. He says 'Don't worry. It's fine.' And 'How are you?' to the next one. He went to each and every one, greeted them. Of course the Saudis were all looking amazed but they kept very well in the background. Then when he finished he said a few words and told them that they do great work here; they must bring their experience back to South Africa to serve the people also in South Africa. Eventually we left and we prepared and we flew out, President Mandela in his plane and we, Minister Nzo and me, in another plane that we chartered from the Saudis to go to Oman where a ministerial meeting was taking place.

That night, while we were in Oman, I got a telephone call in the middle of the night! 'The director general wants to talk to you.' I said, 'Please man. I know it's still early evening in South Africa but here it's two o'clock at night.' Rusty's first words were 'What the heck is going on in Riyadh?' I asked him 'What do you mean?' He said 'The newspapers here say that Mr Mandela has been admitted to hospital. How ill is he?' I said 'He's not ill' and I explained the story to him. Then he told me 'You must put out a press release now.' I said, 'You know what? It's two o'clock in the morning. There's no press releases coming out here. You put it out. Here are the facts.'

What had happened was that one of the nurses was so excited to meet Mr Mandela, she immediately phoned home. And she told her, 'Mom you know what? Mr Mandela was in hospital today. I shook his hand. What a great man!' Her mother spoke to her neighbour, and the neighbour spoke to a neighbour, and the neighbour spoke to a journalist and it got to the front page of the *Beeld* newspaper. And then of course it spread. The press release went out and calmed things down.

So I mentioned this to Minister Nzo and then he spoke to Mr Mandela and told him what was happening so he shouldn't worry about it.' A press release was put out'. He just smiled.