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Interview with Frene Ginwala, 11 September 2014, Johannesburg

TT We are seeking insight into what was distinctive about Madiba's leadership and presidency. From your point of view that would include the establishment of ANC's presence in Parliament, and his relationship with Parliament and caucus. There's an idea of him as merely an iconic figure, but people who worked with him are saying he was hands-on and systematic in planning and attending to things.

FG He and Tambo had that sort of thing, not hands-on in a repressive way, but being aware of about a dozen different things, and you sometimes wondered how the hell did he even know and how to keep it in his head? You would need to probe it with different people – there would be different perspectives because of the way he worked.

Parliament

FG Sometimes one needs to go back to explain something else. He had this respect for Parliament. I noticed it when he came out of prison. He would ask questions about the British parliament, 'How did those MPs relate?' On one occasion I went into my usual diatribe against the British, 'They passed the constitution of 1910 establishing the Union of South Africa.' He said, 'No, no, in the anti-apartheid campaign.' I explained it was not Parliament but a strong Labour Party element that supported us and some others – there was a Tory peer who was very supportive of the anti-apartheid movement.

So he was fascinated and once - before I became speaker – he said he had heard, I don't know where from, that one of the things I was doing, was going to different parliaments to explain and appeal for sanctions, and so on. I told him that it was mainly to get the oil boycott; that I had gone to the Scandinavian parliaments for that. It was by and large a left-wing Labour Party grouping that was supportive, not the conservatives.

So he was very interested and seem to be aware that parliaments had a role in our struggle. He never pursued the matter, but I realised then how much he thought it was a factor. Very few people did think of parliaments as a factor.

Inclusiveness in negotiations

All our negotiations were on the basis that nobody should be excluded. Madiba's point was, 'No, let everybody come, if they want to sit they can put another chair there for them.' But, also, his attitude during negotiations, was that although it was this very inclusive thing, ultimately the ANC position had to go through.

I'll give you an example. I was on the same working group in the multi-party talks, with Valli and Cyril and Albie. Because of Cyril's presence it was the main group dealing with all sorts of things which we as a working group may not have handled. We had a problem, what to do about the majority needed to change the constitution. The Nats were adamant. Now, all the ANC provinces were consulted on things like that, either through provincial meetings or special meetings of the negotiations commission to which chairs and secretaries of the provinces were invited. Some of those I was not part of, but knew the result of the consultation. We had reached a sort of crisis: 75 percent versus 70 percent, and it looked like there was going to be a break down.

So late at night we went to see Madiba, because Cyril said we have to consult. Madiba opened the door for us and we went in. Cyril explained the problem, that there was going to be a breakdown over this issue. He listened very patiently and then he said, 'No, I understand,' because Cyril was quite persistent. I think Valli might have said something, but most of us didn't say much, we were there more to know what was going on. He then said, 'Okay, if there is going to be a breakdown we have to accept it.' And then he looked at Cyril: 'But make sure that it is not the ANC that is going to break those discussions.' That's what I mean when I say he was always the voice of the ANC, the final decision of the ANC.

The next morning I was walking into the multi-party talks. Cyril was there. As we were going to the working group I asked, 'Cyril, how are you going to manage this?' Of course Cyril always has a grin on his face when he is up to something. I just watched him.

He started, saying, 'Mr Chairman, I really feel that we have stressed the parties on the other side.' All these crocodile tears, great sympathy, and he pointed to Viljoen and said, 'He's now ill, look at what's happening to them.' And he went around like this and I thought, 'What is he up to?'

What he was up to was to get all of them to talk first so that he could talk last. This was Cyril's way of getting through. And it was true, we were not blamed. Everybody would start saying, 'We have consulted our principals and they had said' That's what Cyril did. And at the end, it wasn't us who broke the negotiations: there had been so many ifs and buts from everybody except the Nats who said they were determined on getting their position.

A week or more later, when we were talking to Madiba – Barbara, Jessie and myself – he asked, 'What happened? You seem to have won. How did that happen?' I laughed. I didn't know what to tell him. I said, 'Cyril did report to the negotiations commission and what happened - we didn't get blamed for that.' And of course his attitude was, 'Good, good' - he expected that sort of thing from people.

Madiba followed negotiations meticulously. I used to feel exhausted having to go at 5.30 or 6.00 in the morning, if I was going. I was not a member of the negotiations commission but I was occasionally called in. I would see Walter there, I would see Madiba there, and I thought, 'If they can come up at this hour of morning, who am I to complain?' They were diligent in their attendance and in their participation. So they were very much involved, right through, because he wanted to know about the negotiations.

Speaker of Parliament

This approach flowed into Parliament, the notion that the ANC voice must have the decisive voice and have the right to speak, that we must always ensure that our positions were held, it came through all the way and I will come back to that as we talk about Parliament.

Now I had delusions about what I was going to do. I wanted to go into Parliament and I wanted to do research, I wanted to do a lot of things that I had missed out on, I think all of us in exile did. We had the Women's National Coalition, we had a women's group in the ANC, and we had already planned what we wanted as a collective. I very much wanted a woman speaker because I felt, if you saw at that time all the old rules of Parliament about bowing to the speaker, I thought, 'Look at what it would show, to have a woman sitting there'. The person I had in mind was Ivy Motsepe-Casaburri. I had seen her chair a big session of the ANC national conference and I saw how well she managed it. That's what put in my head that we need her sitting in Parliament as the speaker.

And we wanted a large number of women in the Cabinet. When he announced his Cabinet I called him, now I was an MP, and said, 'Tata, I am calling you because we are shocked by how few women you have put in your Cabinet.' I think he was attacking me because he was defensive, I don't know. 'But I want you to be speaker,' he said. I said, 'Tata, I am not talking about me.' I was horrified, I had seen that suggestion in the media but I didn't take it seriously. He said, 'Why are you and Kathy the only ones who always disagree with me when I want you to do anything?' 'Look,' I said, 'I'm not talking to you about what I am doing, I'll come and talk to you about that, but I am telling you I think we are very disappointed with your Cabinet about women.'

TT He recalls that conversation in his manuscript!

FG He was already aware of tensions in exile and so on, and I told him, 'Look, I was very unpopular because I speak my mind.' I made it very clear, it was on the issues and I didn't try to undermine people. That's the first time I realised, 'Oh my God, I have all my plans, but what's going to happen?' because I knew him to

be very stubborn and very determined in getting his own way. The trouble was his way and my way didn't always agree. But it was a losing battle as far as I was concerned. So that was the lead up to Parliament.

On the night of the caucus, when the choice came to elect our candidate for speaker, he had told me that some of the exile problems had come up, and so on. He had once asked me and I said, 'There are all sorts of reasons and I think we're going to face more in the country, we have already. When you get the prisoners, you get the UDF, non-prisoners, you get the exiles coming in, exile leadership and other exiles – those are the differences.' And he laughed and said, 'So you mean I have still got negotiations.' I said, 'I don't know about negotiations, but you're going to have to reconcile, with Oliver not being there, because very often Oliver had to resolve issues, even in Lusaka when there were problems.' It was a casual conversation but I hoped that I had sensitised him.

When we got to caucus Thabo comes to me and says, 'I have been sent by the leadership. We want to nominate you as speaker. Are you going to accept?' I thought about it and that, 'If I say no, what am I going to achieve, I'm going to create unnecessary problems.' And by then I had come to terms with it and I respected them for asking because until then nobody had asked me anything, I had just been told. So I said, 'Okay proceed, I will.' To my joy somebody else was nominated and we were both sent out. I have never wanted to lose an election but God, did I want to lose that one because I was out and nobody could blame me. And that was the way I became speaker.

An inclusive parliament

So I won the election and I was now the ANC candidate for speaker. I went to him a few days later and I said, 'Now I have accepted your decision.' So of course he laughed. I asked, 'What is it you want me to do, how you want that parliament to be run?' He replied laughing, 'You know, I've never been a Member of Parliament so I don't know.' And he asked, 'What do you think?' I said, 'One, we need to change that institution. It's missing elements. It called itself Parliament but there's never been democracy.'

He said, 'Look, you asked me for guidance, I want you to manage Parliament the way we managed the negotiations. It has to be inclusive. We've already got the electoral system we need, but I want you to run Parliament the way we did with negotiations where everybody was allowed to come and have a say and they were allowed to speak freely. The biggest challenge is that our people are not used to being in Parliament, the public is not used to Parliament, so we must make sure that everybody, every political party, every South African thinks it is their parliament.' I think I am more or less repeating his words. I've often wondered, did I get it right, he seemed to think so afterwards, he said.

I then went and thought about it, and later on he asked me and I told him what I had done. I spoke to Stofile. By now we had all been sworn in and ANC MPs had just gone overboard with the seating. We already had almost a two thirds majority, but they had gone overboard and taken all the seats and there was very little front bench space left. So I went to Stof and said, 'Look, Stof, this is

what Madiba has told me.' So he asked, 'What do you want us to do?' I told him, 'I don't really know, but when I think about it, for the first time the public are going to watch parliament on TV. So it is very important that the other parties are visible. It doesn't matter that we have got a two thirds majority. I see ANC MPs are already taking all the front bench seats except two or three and we need two to three more.' He asked if I wanted him to move some members. I said, 'It doesn't matter who sits behind, but we need Constand Viljoen, we have a Government of National Unity, so the National Party and the IFP will be there, you need the Democratic Party in the front benches, so we need those seats.' He asked, 'How many more?' And I said, 'One more, we want PAC there also.'

So we did have Constand Viljoen sitting there. There were seven parties then. It was only the ACDP, a two member party, which was not in front. PAC had five seats and we had the PAC sitting there. Behind all of these people were ANC people. Stof never let me forget it, but I think he understood because I explained.

What was surprising in that period, and I think it probably still is to some extent, was how people were engaging with Parliament. Nomboniso Gaza once told me when she was in the Transkei, about three years into the first parliament, women were sitting there listening. It was after Trevor became Finance Minister. They were sitting there and they were engaging with the budget while he was delivering it, 'No Trevor you can't do that, this is what you must do'. When she told me this it made me realise that people were actually engaging, certainly in those first years. It was a novelty, seeing your leaders. But that involvement was there, we saw it, and when Madiba asked me, 'To what extent are people involved?' I said, 'I am sure that when you are asked questions you will realise just how informed people are on what is going on.'

We did also showcase Parliament. That also depended on the ministers. Kader Asmal as minister of water affairs, had started treating water as a human right and when we had the first million homes connected he came to me and said, 'I want to bring the women from that household to Parliament.' I told him, 'Bring them.' And we acknowledged them from the chair. We did a lot of things like this.

Madiba always noticed, which showed that he was watching, or was being told and he would sometimes say, 'You know this thing was very good'. So I realised he was keeping an eye on it. When ministers didn't pitch up or members left empty benches and Stof was trying very hard, I once said to Stof, 'You are the chief whip, why don't you write to Madiba or see him because they should be coming to Parliament.' One of the National Party members, an Italian Afrikaner as he called himself, used to call snap debates, and this was showing us up. So Stof did go and the ministers got letters from Madiba, to say they must be there. But he also said, 'You must find a way of making sure that you don't put too much of a burden on them because they do have other work.' So he used to act.

TT What about caucus? He seemed to pay caucus a lot of attention?

FG He did. But also he knew what was going on, so clearly he would be asking others. It wouldn't be only me. He expected me to come regularly and tell him what was going on. But it was a question of how often can I go to see him, I would go if there was a problem, but I also felt, 'Should I be infringing on his time?'

Meeting visitors to Parliament

FG He was also very careful about meeting visitors to Parliament. Everybody who came to South Africa would want to meet him. If parliamentary people came on visits or anything else his office would phone me, not him, and say that 'These people have asked to see him - what can you tell us about them and how important do you think they are, because he's very, very busy. So I would guide them and especially like when the Swedish parliamentarians and the Swedish speaker, came here, I urged him, 'Please do meet them, because they were the one Western country that helped.' That's the kind of thing I would be bringing in.

But also very often when we would at the same time be leaving Parliament if he had been there, he would come out of the side door of Parliament towards Tuynhuys. There is that gate where the public used to gather and he would always walk - at least when I was there and I presume it was always - he would go and greet them. If they were young people he would say, 'You see, this lady now is the head of Parliament but it is because she studied hard, she went to university. Now you,' and he was talking to all these young girls, 'you make sure you go and get your education.' And they would all put out their hands. This is something he did to everyone, but it was very important that he felt he had to engage with these people who were there outside the gate. The security got used to him doing the sort of thing.

He was always very careful when we went up the steps, especially if there had been visitors to Parliament, a head of state or anybody else, to line up there at the back entrance of Tuynhuys and have a photo opportunity. It all had to be arranged with his office and obviously if he had said, 'No', it wouldn't happen. But he was meticulous about that - with the presiding officers of both houses, him and the visitors.

Once I asked him, 'Tata, whenever you come here to Parliament you always dress in a suit and tie but you are known for your Madiba shirts, it's your trademark now. You've never worn one to Parliament.' He put on his dignified face and said 'Frene, Parliament represents the people, I have to respect it and so I do always wear the suit.' I said, 'I can understand that when you are opening Parliament and walking up the red carpet, but when you just drop in as you do.' 'No,' he said, 'I have to change into a suit.'

These are little things, but they showed a very conscious concern about Parliament.

President's questions and debates

When ministers were not answering questions properly or weren't there to answer questions he wrote to them very critically because he used to ask the chief whip, 'Who are these ministers?' And he would actually write to them saying, 'You must respect the questions'.

Now we had a lot of respect for him and because we didn't want to put pressure on him, there was no president's question time. It only came in once Thabo became president and we put it in the rules. We explained to the other parties, 'We think it is better not to have the president's question time, if you have specific questions we can try and see of ways that government will answer them.' It was just a general ANC view that we should ease the pressure on him and it was accepted. It wasn't that he was avoiding it, I don't know if he ever realised that we had made a special deal for him. This was his attitude towards Parliament, the sort of respect he paid to it. Because it was the first time, he never asked me why he was not answering questions, I've not said anything and I don't know whether Stof or any of the others said anything, but it was discussed in the Rules Committee when we were discussing president's question time and once he left and Thabo came in, we introduced question time for the president properly with fixed times.

When the TRC report was coming out, it was going to be handed to him. I was in China and had to come back. I landed and I had arranged for my clothes to be brought to the airport, I changed and went straight from the airport to Pretoria for the official handing over by Tutu. The reason he wanted me there, was that he never wanted anybody to say that he had tampered or interfered with it. That's what he told me. He wanted to hand it over to me, in other words to Parliament, as soon as he received it. I thought it to myself 'Chummy, if you wanted to read it you would have done so!' I could see what he was trying to do, and literally that's what he did, no matter that I might have been half asleep. He received it from Tutu and if you see the TV, you will see that he literally looked at the pile of books and he gave them to me. This was his view that he must not be seen to be interfering, but by that time already there was a sort of dispute between the ANC and the TRC over the question of just war and those sorts of issues, so I could understand that he was anxious for this.

Afterwards I wrote to him to say, 'At some point you need to come and introduce the debate on the TRC report.' He said, 'I will do that', and I got a message from his office saying that he would come. He did come later on and he introduced the debate and responded at the end of the debate.

TT Generally what was his attitude to debates, the State of the Nation debates and others?

FG For the State of the Nation debates, he was always there. He delivered his message, a prepared speech. It was only the questions we excused him from, not the debates. He would sit there during the debate diligently taking notes. I presume he then used the notes in Cabinet discussion, but he was always sitting there diligently taking notes.

I started a practice with him which turned out to be unnecessary. He once asked, 'What happens if I'm late when I come to Parliament?' I said 'No, you can walk in any time.' He said, 'No, when I'm supposed to be there, I might be on an international call.' I just told him, 'No, tell your staff to tell your security to contact me,' and they could let me know so I would be late rather than him. But he was never late. I'm very proud of the fact that never once did that first Parliament ever start late. Because one way or another we managed it and without blaming the president or a minister, because it was important especially in those first years of managing in that kind of way. One way or another we managed, because I would get the message from his office, but it started with him and we maintained it subsequently. It was all part of his attitude towards Parliament.

If he felt that they were things he had to come and say, it was understood that he could walk in at any time and could speak at any time. But he always got his office to let me know either that he wanted to make a statement in which case I would literally announce, 'The president wishes to make a statement', and we had planned the day if there was going to be something like that thing. But that was the way he would respond. He was also meticulous in his responses.

In his ANC office

- TT You talked about how you took up with Madiba the number of women in cabinet. To what extent did he make an impact on gender issues?
- FG You have to go back to his release to see the changes. I noticed this even in exile. His first speeches were about 'mothers' and 'daughters', in other words a different kind of relationship, or 'our women'. So when I was on his secretariat - you remember his speech 'I am a black man in a white man's court' - I rewrote it, 'I am a woman in all-male court', and I gave it to him, saying, 'Please will you read this. Please just read it carefully, I have changed the "black" to "women" and the "white" to "men".' Of course he had a good laugh and I said, 'Yes, Tata, you have to be more aware when you speak. You have said you believe in equality and I believe you but you have to get out of your patriarchal heritage.' He laughed and once, as a joke, he told somebody, 'You know, this is a very clever Speaker we've got, she sometimes quotes my own speeches at me.' I went to him afterwards and asked, 'When did I ever quote your speech to you?' He said, 'You didn't quote it, you wrote it to me!'

What he used to do, I am going back to before he became president, he would tell the public 'You know I have appointed three women to head the most important ANC office, the president's office. I didn't do it because they beautiful though they are. I didn't do it because...' I can't remember what the second reason was. 'The reason I've done it, they are the only people who tell me when I'm wrong. They even tell me when I wear the wrong socks. I feel I want to go back to prison.' Now people used to believe this and we used to say, 'Please don't say this.' Once we were in the Free State, I think, at an ANC rally - when we were coming off the platform we let him and the security go down first and we went down afterwards. A whole group of women descended

on us, 'You girls, has the man not suffered enough!' These people were believing that he was so miserable because of us that he wanted to go back to prison!

TT He refers to you in his manuscript as the three witches!

FG We knew he had said something like that.

There's something else that did concern us. One day we got a call, he used to call us very early in the morning, and we tried to tell him, 'Look were not used to getting up at this hour. You have been in prison, you were getting up then, but sometimes we work late at night.' Then he improved a little bit by half an hour or so, and he would ask, 'Oh, did I wake you?'

One day I got a call from his security 'Where is Tata?' - He was still president of the ANC. I said 'Why you are asking me, you are supposed to be looking after him.' He said 'We were walking, and he disappeared.' So I said, 'Have you phoned Barbara?' He replied, 'We are phoning all of you.' I phoned Barbara and Barbara said, 'I'm going to the office quickly.' I phoned Jessie. None of us knew where he was. A little later he comes into what was then Shell House, comes in and says, 'Look, I had to take a taxi, I didn't have any money and the chap said it was okay.' There was a young girl called Audrey and he said, 'Will you please pay this taxi when it comes.' What had happened was that he had seen a taxi, he had just jumped on it.

TT Someone told me about this, that the security were not yet there, that he had a meeting he had to get to and he didn't want to be late.

FG We told them they were fat and lazy and he was fit because he was out of prison. So when he got in he found Barbara on the phone and he just walked into his office while she was pulling her hair out – she asked, 'Where have you been? What's going on?' and that's what he told her, that he was late for a meeting: 'I couldn't wait for those fellows.'

This is him coming out of prison, the way he went around to his neighbours. He was so meticulous worrying about his neighbours.

This was a man showing himself in different ways: it's the same person, he didn't have one picture for so-and-so and another picture for so-and-so. His innate characteristics, good and bad, would come out, in the way he treated people.

Respect for institutions and the law

To come back to Parliament, that sort of attitude was there all the time. I had produced a special edition of Hansard bound in brown leather with gold trimmings, and I gave it to him when he left the presidency. He said 'What is this?' 'It's just to remind you of Parliament.'

The other thing, he said he had heard, 'You always give a flag to everybody who addresses your National Assembly.' I told him, 'Yes, we fly a ceremonial flag when a head of state addresses it.' I thought the best gift we could give to a head of state who probably has more money than the whole of our parliament has, would be the flag that was flying over Parliament at that time. So I thought then I must give him the flag when he leaves. We used to make a special

ceremonial box, I've got a picture of my handing over the constitution to him on one occasion. We used to do this partly because we were in bad financial straits at the time and MPs used to call me a miser but I would tell them, 'I'm not a miser, it's not my money'. What gifts could I give the British Queen, for example, just think of it – was I supposed to give her gold and diamond. So we did give him that flag and we used to give it to every head of state who addressed the National Assembly.

Another thing about him, I'm using Parliament, but also in a general sense the way he felt accountable to institutions. When there was legislation on municipalities which would have affected the local government elections, it had been challenged legally. He had been informed that it had gone against the government. Early in the morning he called us to a meeting at his house and told us that he had been informed Parliament in that legislation had transferred certain things to be finalised by the president and that was the ground on which the Constitutional Court said, it can't be done. I had warned Valli about this, because he was the minister responsible, when I first saw the legislation and Valli said, 'We don't have time.' I told him, 'It's my job to let you know. What to do about it is your problem', because as Parliament we always sat down and looked at especially important legislation. So when we met he told us this and Valli said, 'You know Frene warned me about it but we had to do it because of the imminence of elections.' So he asked, 'How long will it take to change?' and I said, 'We can reconvene Parliament if necessary', but even before I could finish he said, 'But the one thing is this, we must respect the decision of the Constitutional Court, there can be no question of denying or in any way rejecting that.'

Similarly when Louis Luyt summonsed him to give evidence, I remember his lawyer, this was at his house, where he said he was going to go and give evidence. I asked, 'Does he have to?' The lawyer said, 'No, he could argue that he won't come.' Madiba said, 'No, no, we must respect the court, I must show an example.'

This ran through him, respecting the decisions of the court.

Another thing, people used to come late even into NEC meetings. The first item on the agenda is always the president's report. He said 'The doors must be closed until I finish speaking, and none of you must tell those who come late what I have said'.

Again, he respected people but he expected respect, it was a two-way thing, and people until then I think had never realised that by coming late they were disrespecting. He used to lock the doors while he was speaking.

After he stopped being president of the ANC and the country he only came to one NEC meeting, very early on. He had the right to come. He was very angry, he felt none of us supported him. I talked to him, 'It's not true, if you think back maybe some of us who are not important to you, you might not have heard what we were saying.' He had come to complain about some of the things the

ANC was doing. To my knowledge he never came again, though he was often told and reminded that he had the right to come.

TT What sorts of issues was he raising?

FG I think he was raising generally the loss of values as early as that and how much it was important to respect Parliament, that you do have these different authorities. He said, 'We all think this NEC is the authority but even in the ANC, it is conference that is the senior body in the ANC not the NEC. We must not get arrogant.' Even government, I remember how he said it, 'Even government must always understand that it is accountable to the people.'