

Transcript of an interview with Ben Turok, Cape Town, 17 March 2015

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TT You were not in Parliament at the very beginning.

BT No, I came nine months later.

TT Did Mandela attend caucus frequently?

BT Not frequently. In fact, Mary [Turok] was there at the beginning and her memory, is that he didn't attend Parliament a great deal. He didn't come as often as Mbeki for example, so I don't think that he was, as it were, a working member of Parliament, although he was in fact not a member. So his attendances at both caucus and the House itself were not that frequent.

TT In notes for some occasions when he did attend, caucus he apologises for not coming more frequently.

BT Well, that would be typical of the man. His style was so accommodating. Yes he would do that.

A multi-party parliament

TT He says on one occasion that caucus is the engine of parliament's work of transformation.

BT Oh it's more than that. He would be right if it worked that way. Things have always been a bit rough in Parliament, with regard to the discipline of members attending and so on and taking the place seriously. Governing a multi-party parliament is not easy, because in many ANC minds, 'We are the ruling party not just the governing party and therefore what we say goes.' But that doesn't work in a multi-party parliament because the principle of a multi-party parliament, by definition, is that parties govern together. Certainly you can't pass legislation if you don't act as a multi-party parliament because you can't impose all the time, you simply can't. The machine doesn't work like that.

But many ANC people, including leaders, took quite a few years to adjust to the idea that we're a parliamentary democracy and not just a dominant party. And

so, in the early years, that was a major difficulty and Madiba of course had to smooth the way to setting the atmosphere where you respect the opposition, which he did very well. But ANC didn't want to respect the opposition. That is why when you said he apologised for not attending, I said that's typical. He wanted to convey the idea that the opposition had to be respected and of course it was a Government of National Unity and that made it even more essential. So, yes, I would say he was too busy to take Parliament too seriously but he was right in the sense that the caucus is the political engine of parliament.

TT Speaking to the caucus on one occasion in 1996, he made a statement, which he often made and I guess there must've been a context at that moment: 'We did not win through military victory where we dictate terms to a defeated enemy.'

BT Exactly! Now that was hard to swallow for most MPs. Let's face it there were people with huge reservations about CODESA. Most of us had some reservations and when we came to Parliament we were reluctant, many MPs, to accept the Government of National Unity and reluctant to accept that the opposition had rights. So when he said that, it came as a bit of a shock and a lot of MPs didn't like it.

But a parliament works through committees and the committees do legislation and so on. When you sit in a committee, even though you have a majority, if you can't get the agreement of the opposition, nothing happens and you can't work because they can sabotage the committee so easily. They can just walk out and break the quorum and all that kind of stuff. There we were sitting in those committees – I was in the finance committee and the trade and industry committee – and we realised that what Madiba said was right. We didn't win that military victory. We won a negotiated settlement and the institution of Parliament and the Constitution were drafted in such a way - and we're still stuck with it – that we're handcuffed, correctly in my view, to a parliamentary democracy and the Constitution. It does handcuff you. It means you must observe rules and you must work according to procedures. You have to and if you don't, it doesn't work.

Parliament is a strange animal, where no matter how big a majority you've got - and we had a big majority at the beginning - once you get into work on legislation, you have to get agreement and co-operation from the opposition. If you don't, you won't make progress. In a portfolio committee you can raise questions and difficulties forever, you can't stop it because that's the system. When the law adviser of a department comes and defends a piece of legislation, you have open house, you can talk forever, you can raise the chair, you can say, 'Please, please!' But the chair is asking the opposition to cooperate, you can't impose it. It's very difficult.

Evolving relation to the party

TT Did the view that caucus had of itself evolve in those years?

BT Right from the beginning, Luthuli House was important and Madiba was important and there were people like Valli Moosa and others who had been in CODESA who understood the GNU better than most of us. That was the heart of it, Parliament having come to power, what it meant to have a GNU. So it was the philosophy of the GNU which had to be understood in Parliament because it imposes a style which is quite different to ANC style and it took a while for that to get through, but also because in Parliament the minister has to be a bit aggressive and defend, has to be a bit challenging and some of our people were very good at that. I remember Valli for example being quite aggressive and provocative even, in the House as a minister, yet he was part of CODESA and this new spirit so the place was full of contradictions.

Then comes caucus. Caucus is where the ANC meeting by itself in that institution and therefore is able to tackle things privately. In those days there were not many leaks; leaks came later so it was a bit contained. Caucus at that time, as I remember, wasn't so much dealing with legislation the way we do now, it was policy and attitude, style. It was up to people like Valli and Joe Slovo and others to say, 'Comrades, we can't get away with that, we have to handle things this way and that way because of the GNU'. It was more a sort of reflective body as I remember, reflecting on the situation and on what we can do and what we can't do.

And then came GEAR and that stuff which created a lot of turmoil.

Now caucus works differently. Caucus now is governed by Luthuli House to a high degree and also by the Political Committee.

I can't remember how the machine worked then, but because there was so much good will at that time, the sense that we all need to pull together, I think that Luthuli House was not as dominant then. I think also that there were so many senior people in Parliament, like the Slovo's and the Valli's and other people that came from the struggle. They were senior in the ANC and they were sitting there. My sense is that the atmosphere of seniority and authority from people like Joe and Valli and others was so strong and the respect was so strong that it wasn't as antagonistic as now.

Impact of GEAR

GEAR created a new environment.

I was in the finance committee and the trade and industry committee and I was I suppose one of the senior people. One afternoon we got called by Trevor to a meeting upstairs in the committee room and there was the Ambassador of France, Trevor and about twenty of us. I remember Rob Davies being there and a few others. Trevor said, 'Look we've called you because there's a new economic policy and tomorrow we're going to announce it in the House.' We were all shocked because there'd been no sense that something like this was coming, it was kept under wraps. Rob said, 'Give us a copy,' and Trevor said, 'No I can't because it will leak to the media, you'll get it tomorrow in the House.' We were shocked. Then came this GEAR thing.

In the finance committee GEAR was presented by this chap who used to be a World Bank employee and I was deeply offended, having my attitude to the bank as a funder over so many years. So I asked him, at question time, 'Are you an employee of the World Bank?' He said, 'I was, but I'm South African born.' My question to him implied, what is he doing in the Finance Committee and he said, 'I'm a South African'. Now he led the report to the committee and we were terribly unhappy and of course COSATU was going mad and there were a whole lot of NGOs and research groups who were fighting and it was a big campaign. A lot of us felt, in finance and so on, that this turned the tables on ANC policy and we were very shocked when Madiba said that this is not negotiable.

I need to go back a bit. At the *Ready-to-Govern* conference a group was asked to go outside and to discuss the formulation on nationalisation and privatisation. I've written about it in my book '*Nothing but the Truth*'. What I remember is this. There was an economics commission, Madiba was there, Joe was there, Walter was there and Tito chaired. It was a big commission, one of the biggest in the conference.

When we came to discussing the phrase about privatisation, Alec Erwin got up on behalf of COSATU and said that COSATU will never accept privatisation and there was a deadlock. Then Madiba got up and he said, as I remember, that he just came from Davos where he made two speeches. In the first speech he got a standing ovation and in the second speech it was total silence, because in the second speech he mentioned nationalisation. That story upset the meeting terribly. 'So,' he said, 'we must be careful.' After further debate, and I'm not sure if it was Madiba himself, someone proposed that a group of four should go out and negotiate a formulation. They went outside and they negotiated this new formulation of 'case-by-case' and that was agreed to. It was clear to us that Madiba, in his wisdom, was saying to the movement, 'We need a shift away from the nationalisation policy', and a case-by-case cautious economic policy', and GEAR came naturally in that context.

So in a sense we were prepared. I used to talk to Gill Marcus, who was chair of the finance committee, privately, and she explained the financial crisis to me, which I think was exaggerated then given what we see today when our debt levels are far higher than they used to be in 1994, so as I see it, what was all the alarm about? The debt levels and the interest payments were stated as crippling and so on. But how deep was the crisis really and was Madiba convinced that the crisis was such that it would destroy the government? I think that is a critical issue; what was his real view? I mean, it's all very well going along with Trevor, Thabo and Alec - but what was his own view or was he going along with that view of the big four? But in meetings and in Parliament he defended the policies of GEAR and austerity effectively. It was a game-changing moment and in my view it set a trajectory to where we are now. I believe frankly that our economic crisis today has its origin in GEAR.

TT And it changed the relation of caucus to the leadership?

BT Yes, because there were serious reservations by many. People did speak. My recollection was that there were odd guys who would get up in caucus and say, 'This is not our policy', and people would raise their difficulties often in a crude way because people had no economic experience. But we were all pretty ignorant. When I got into the finance committee, I immediately set up a learning group and we invited top economists to come and brief us with Gill's permission and we published it. It was actually a study group on macro-economic policy, monetary policy and fiscal policy, because we were concerned. I remember phoning a very distinguished professor emeritus of economics and finance in the United States and said to him, 'I'm in the middle of this thing now in the finance committee and it's very contentious. We've got some very serious economists in SA, who are opposed totally to GEAR. Who's right?' And he sent me some material. So I did my best to investigate.

But Madiba went along with it and the question is why?

Location of Parliament

TT One issue where I think I saw your name mentioned in the media was the location of Parliament. Was it an issue in caucus?

BT Well, it was touch and go because the majority apparently in Cabinet and the leadership wanted to move Parliament to Pretoria. But I was concerned, since I lived in Cape Town and thought anyway that the consequences for Cape Town of moving Parliament would be very serious in terms of economic loss of jobs and so on. Partly it was selfish but partly also a feeling that Cape Town couldn't afford to lose this institution. Kader Asmal fought tooth and nail and he won.

Yes, it was an issue in caucus, very heated, and people like Valli got up and said, 'I'm sick and tired of travelling up and down twice a week to Cape Town,' and he said he was exhausted and of course it was true. Yes, it was a fight in caucus and people got very angry with Kader, but he was very tough about it.

A tense start to governing

TT A tense moment in the first parliament happened when Mandela said in the Senate that he had given the order to shoot in defence of Shell House and it was followed by a special debate. Do you remember that?

BT I don't remember him making the statement or defending that particular thing, but look the atmosphere was so tense.

In fact, I think one must say very directly that we were all a bit numb at that time. There we were, sitting in Parliament with De Klerk and all the violence. I think we were psychologically traumatised by the challenges. On the one hand we felt victorious but on the other hand it felt a bit of a hollow victory.

Let me illustrate this. When Tokyo was made Premier in Gauteng, I was head of RDP in the province. There was a march past of the army and the police and Tokyo took the salute on the steps of the civic centre and I was very close to him. There came the Casspirs and all these white troops who had shot people, in Boipatong and everywhere else, driving past and saluting Tokyo. It seemed so

unreal. I thought any minute these guys are going to turn around and shoot us all.

Even in Parliament, with Madiba and everything else I think there was a sense of unreality about it all. It was not as if we had planned this. It was not as if we were prepared for it. There was a sense of unreality and psychological trauma, a sense of, 'What the hell are we're going to do? Here we are, we're the majority. But here's De Klerk and the army guys saluting and all that, and the judiciary, the whole machine and the public service!'

When I was in the cabinet in Gauteng with Tokyo, we invited De Klerk for lunch. This was the sort of custom and we met in the cabinet office in the old Transvaal Administration with statues of Verwoerd and everybody there. De Klerk came for lunch and you had to pinch yourself that you're sitting with De Klerk for lunch, chatting amiably.

I think an account of that time should reflect that, the sense of unreality, the sense of psychological trauma. This was in caucus too because when we went into caucus there was Madiba talking to us in his calm way and keeping the temperature even. I don't feel that he ever stirred us to move to get militant. I think on the contrary he was very judicious in the way he handled us and if he lectured to us it was, 'Be reasonable', and 'Be sensible', whereas a lot of us were not, we were in the mode of combat with Chris Hani and all that.

So, the point I'm trying to make, very obliquely, is that all this must be put in the context of a movement, certainly in Parliament, which is somewhat traumatised, somewhat at a loss and somewhat indecisive because the situation was so complex.

His speeches in the House were always statesmanlike and always reflective and judicious, He was leading the country not just Parliament. He used Parliament as the forum to address the nation. There were contradictions – on the one hand the situation was critical. It required firmness, toughness; and on the other hand it had to be handled in the way of a long view of settling maturely. Maturity was the big issue. I think there was a contradiction. On the one hand you had to be tough to deal with the security issue: Boipatong, KZN. I went to visit the East Rand, the Benoni area, and it was quite frightening, this was a war zone and whatever you read in the papers didn't reflect exactly what happened. So he knew and he had to give leadership around that.

Media

- TT In a meeting of officials preparing for the special debate on Shell House, he says that in strategizing for the debate they must bear in mind the need to get the good opinion of the media noting that whites have a very powerful weapon in the media.
- BT Yes, he was very smart. He was saying that we are not hegemonic, and that still continues today, that we are not totally in power. We control all the institutions but we're not in power. We're in office as Tokyo used to say. He understood that

better than anybody else that when you debate in the House, you have to reflect the balance of power and not just ANC revolution.

I find that very insightful that the media was understood to be very critical. I talked to Pallo about this media thing and he said to me, regarding my problems over the Information Bill, that throughout the history of the ANC and including in that period, there were always some newspaper or other which was supporting us or at least sympathetic to us, but not now. Now everybody is against us. Pallo was very distressed by that and I am, that we have united not only the opposition in parliament, but we have united the press against us.

Madiba understood this better than we did, 'Don't allow the media to be a united force against you because they represent a very strong opinion in the country and power'.

The RDP was symptomatic. When I became head of the RDP in Gauteng, the media was hostile as hell, 'communist and all that', but as soon as it became a law and a White Paper, they switched. Business switched, media switched, everybody suddenly switched! I had enormous support for the RDP suddenly because we were in power. I had a fascinating private meeting with the former administrator of the Transvaal and his officials – I said to them, 'I'm head of the RDP in the ANC and I'm coming to talk to you about it,' and he said, 'Make no mistake, the public service will serve any government that is elected. We are a hundred per cent behind the RDP,' and he pulled out a copy, he had it in his hand. 'We all have copies and we are a hundred per cent behind it.' You see, it was a tactical switch; in their hearts who knows. The media did the same, 'This is now government policy and we respect that'. Madiba facilitated that because he was the voice of reason. He led the way to ensure that the media did not become hostile and he handled them very well.

Transformation and Reconciliation

TT That raises a question about reconciliation and nation building, and the extent to which it was something he pursued for itself or because it was necessary for going forward.

BT I think both. The critical moment was when the Freedom Charter said, 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it'. It actually surprised me, that phrase, and I think a lot of us thought this was a new departure. Those in leadership positions understood that the minority ratios in South Africa would force the ANC into a non-racial future. There was no way you could throw two million people into the sea. As against the PAC, we adopted this phrase and when we came to power that was the perspective, that SA has got to be multi-racial and that there is no way that you can by-pass it either tactically or in terms of the destiny of the country, the rainbow nation. Madiba understood it better than anybody else, hence his negotiations and all that. I don't think it was just opportunism, it was part of the understanding that this is a multi-racial country. I wish we still talked about a multi-racial country, because we are multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-racial.

- TT Some have commented on how the way Madiba talked about race differed from what had become the dominant ANC position, suggesting that he 'sustained multi-racialism within non-racialism'. For the ANC it became black and white, but he always said 'White and Black, that is African, Coloured and Indian'. Was it just habit? Or a response to the experience of organising and mobilising communities?
- BT It's wisdom. All my life we were organised like that, as Congress of Democrats and so on and it worked. We have often defended the way we worked and it did work. Yes, we were multi-racial in separate organisations but it worked. That's why we took so long to change the ANC to a non-racial organisation. Madiba understood that. He was not an African nationalist. Not in these years. I think it's important to say that and certainly not black power.