

**Edited Interview Transcript of Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2003**

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TAPE 18/32

TAPE 1 SIDE 1

IAIN: We're talking about the Committee for Clemency. Now you must have been aware then that you're organising this Committee whilst the state is still busy mopping the underground activities. There were a number of trials still proceeding, and people are still being sent to jail and only beginning their sentencing?

MEWA: Adaptation is a criterion, not only peculiar to human beings. It is also relevant to all creation. How one adapts is dependent on the intensity of one's responses to a set of given circumstances. It was historically a practice in all managed states when people entered into covenants to live together, classically or implicitly. Against that background, states which yielded power have to be characterised as compassionate state; or like Shakespeare would say, Mercy in docks would make an ocean of love. I did not expect a sudden change in heart of our oppressors, but there were historical precedences. Say the mass release of prisoners. Or like Robey Liebbrandt – and don't forget he was a German spy - being convicted to death, to hang for treasonable offences against the State under a United Party government when South Africa was at war. When the Nats came to power one of their first political acts was the release of what they termed `political prisoners`. Their death sentences had already been commuted by the United Party government to life sentences. And they did it on special days – like to celebrate the Nat election victory.

Now, South Africa was going to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of the Republic in 1971. And in my motivation to the Committee I thought it would be a good idea to make this call to coincide with that event. I myself had a two pronged approach to it. I had rejected the republic then and its formation and I used the Committee of Clemency to call for clemency as a mobilisation against it - the republic celebrations - because all South Africans could not celebrate this. Not for a single moment did I delude myself that because we are making a call the National Party would suddenly have a change of heart and release our leaders. To that extent, yes I was politicking, using the state of oppression to my advantage by invoking the National Party history and the history of successive governments in our country on the one hand. On the other hand it had to be a strategic objective to raise the level of consciousness of people. Now if I were to do it alone or had I done that alone with a group of leftists like myself I would have been in immediate trouble with the state. But with the Archbishop of Durban and Alan Paton and Alec Boraine and Mrs [NAME UNCLEAR] , and

a whole range of people as your allies in the call. They must have had different agendas but my agenda was very, very clear. That the republic does not represent the will or total population as such. That its struggle against the British Empire and imperialism is one thing - not be the outpost of the British Empire. But the preponderant position held by the National Party, which was the political wing of the Broederbond, was the total control of South Africa by this grouping of people. They used the system of imperialism to their advantage. The mining industry suddenly became accessible to Afrikaans-speaking white people, the Mullers who became Directors of General Mining and the introduction of the Afrikaans-speaking academic and entrepreneurs into the banking industry, into the insurance industry, was a double-edged knife against British imperialism. The British thought they would keep economic control and leave the political dirty work to be done by the Afrikaans-speaking white people. From where we came from, where we were and what needed to be done, we had to say no. We had to say to the youth, who by then did - I had forgotten Mandela, and this is not sucking out my thumb. In 1970 we illustrate this point. When I got the students from far and wide, students from high schools, matric students who came to celebrate the life of Gandhi by visiting Phoenix Settlement, where you had groups of people, young people, coming in and spending the day and picnicking in the hope that they will interact with the atmosphere, with the vision, with the foundations of the Settlement. And in this context I got two busloads of people from the Inanda Seminary and I as a banned person took them around, it was very funny for me to do this, but there as an employee of Phoenix Settlement, I had that scope and the opportunity and I was not attending a social gathering. I was performing my duties. It was like selling insurance to a group of three or four people. At one such meeting where these children from Inanda Seminary came up and I took them around the library and the museum which was a new intervention. Ours was a third world museum, not a colonial one. Not ideal but it was headed in that direction. So when these kids came along and I explained to them as to who Gandhi was in relationship to South Africa, and the end of it all some bright spark says `But who was Gandhi?` I tried to be simple and said to her that `Mahatma Gandhi was from India and is the world, what Nelson Mandela is to South Africa and will be to the world`. This dear young lady asked me `and who is Nelson Mandela?` And this was before the launch of the Committee for Clemency.

IAIN: Now at that stage Mandela, to be clear about it, Mandela's political position was as leader of the Congress Youth League and MK. Luthuli, President General of the ANC, was dead. The ANC had just had its Morogoro Conference ...

MEWA: Mandela was in jail, Luthuli had died. The ANC existed both internally and externally. Externally was the leadership of a known group of people to whom we related. Each time they took a decision we applauded. There was no visible overt leadership in the country. I couldn't say I belonged to the ANC, Griffiths couldn't say that he was an ANC leader or that

he belonged to the ANC. But what we did do was compatible with what the ANC would have us do as an organisation. I think it was tactically correct for them to have remained silent and not supportive but we got institutions to support us. In that context, I remember telephoning the Archbishop of Canterbury to get support for this. I even made a call to the Vatican and it was a very impatient Ramgobin who did this. A very indiscreet and undiplomatic intervention!

IAIN: On the advice of the Archbishop of Durban or not?

MEWA: No, no because the Archbishop of Durban would have advised me against it. Because of a call to the Vatican it really get to Pretoria. I don't know what they call him now but he was called a delegate or something of the Vatican. So the person at the Vatican who answered the call put me through to the Pope's Secretary and the Pope's Secretary asked me what is the nature of the call; what was the purpose of the call. And I said to him, `Sir, if I were to give you the purpose of my call, do you think I would ask for the Pope, then there would be no need for me to ask you for the Pope. I might be rude, but please this is a call from South Africa and it is in relationship with a call we are making for the Christian community who we are identified with.` I never got to speak to the Pope.

In Cape Town I had met with the Archbishop of Cape Town Robert Selby Taylor. Geoffrey Budlender, who was a student at UCT and in NUSAS drove me up, in my search for signatures to support the call. Today with the advantage of age and experience I think it was wrong for me to do what I did. At that stage I was angry. In a way I was glad that I was angry but on hindsight I think I was wrong. I went up to Bishop's Court driven by Geoffrey who sat in at the consultation that I had with Selby Taylor. I presented the case to him and he said to me `I have heard you, I will think about it`. For me as a young person, perhaps cocky, this was disturbing. How does the head of a Church hear me, seek time to think about extending understanding, extending mercy, extending love and extending co-existence? How? And I asked His Grace, `Your Grace I am an unconverted Christian and it is with a force of that belief system that I came here. Are you telling me you want time off to think about extending these fundamentals of my faith system?` And he turned around and said to me, `No, no, no, I support it, I support it`. I said thank you very much. There was a little pad, a desk pad, a Mainstay Cane Spirit desk pad lying on his desk. And I wrote out `I support the call for clemency`. , I asked His Grace to authenticate it, to do me the honour of signing it. His Grace did, with his graciousness and much against my crudity. It taught me a lesson. He signed it. Having signed it, the following day it was head line news that His Grace Archbishop Robert Selby Taylor supports the call for clemency. Call me conniving, call me what you want to. The world can sit in judgement. I myself today on hindsight recognise that crudity is no excuse, enthusiasm is no excuse for crudity and bad manners. But after that we became hard friends.

In that same period, around the same time, institutions like Sprocas had emerged. People like Peter Randall, and Beyers Naudé and a whole range of people. They threw us a lifeline and we threw them a lifeline. At the Sprocas meeting in Cape Town some months later, some weeks later, and during the call for clemency, I had stayed overnight at Rick Turner's home in Stellenbosch.

IAIN: Rick Turner's home in Stellenbosch?

MEWA: Rick Turner's mothers home in Stellenbosch. That is where Rick Turner came from. I arrived that night, a little home on a hilltop. I didn't know the environment and when I woke up in the morning the first thing that I saw from the window were these beautiful trees laden with plums, and on the ground. I hadn't even brushed my teeth. I was still in my pyjamas. I went out, and in the heat of doing all this political work, I sat like a child with a glass of water, picking these plums, picking his plums, and eating plums. And when they called me for breakfast I said I am sorry I have had mine. `I just want a cup of tea now`. A little farm boy in the midst of doing this kind of political work.

Now you talk of suppression. Yes, there are many episodes of that nature. An episode that sticks out in my mind is as I had struggled to get the support of Gatsha Buthelezi. And I couldn't. The call was made and this was months later and I cornered him at the Louis Botha Airport, which is what Durban airport was called then. He was on his way out to some international destination. I could corner him because I was on first name terms with him, his wife Irene used to deliver my mail from abroad, so it was quite a good relationship. And I said `Listen I want to talk to you`. I broke all the security. He says `Look you can't open the door for me, my men will open the door for me`. I said `No, no I am your man too. I am a Natalian, you are a Natalian`, I didn't say he was my leader. `And I want to know from you whether support the call for clemency`. He says `Yes I do`. I said I don't have a piece of paper here for me to write this on but what I will do is I am going to make a statement and sign it myself in my name saying that I met with you at the airport and I am going to give it the *Natal Mercury* that you support the call for clemency. He looked at me blank. Peter Mansfield was a journalist with the *Natal Mercury* at the time, I will send this as a news item. He refused to believe that Buthelezi said this, and I said `You are now challenging my integrity. You may check this or not. It is your business`. I can understand his reticence in not wanting to believe that because he became an ally with Buthelezi years later with the KwaZulu Natal indaba and the Inkatha Freedom Party.

At that stage, the *Natal Mercury* carried a small piece to say that Chief Gatsha Buthelezi supports the call for the release of political prisoners, the return of exiles, and the unbanning

of people. But many things happened at the same time and we called it a new kind of intervention, politically. Lots of responses came from lots of different people. I was highly criticised in some circles, personally. Not by members, not because of the call for clemency, me the person. But I was prepared to live with that kind of criticism.

They said I am using this as a ruse for political mobilisation, and in a way it was true and I had no problems with that. Fortunately for me it excited the imagination of lots and lots of people from across the religious spectrum, educational people, social scientists, academics. And therein came a beautiful call to me from two diverse people. One was from Barend van Niekerk, who was a law lecturer at the University of Natal and protagonist of the anti-capital punishment movement. He and I developed a very good relationship. He was very supportive and rather strangely another guy came up with the pretext of wanting to see me to see how we ran the Mahatma Gandhi clinic. This was Lucas Mangope – the future Bantustan leader. He spent an entire afternoon with me as a banned person. He came along and his wife, who was a nurse, ostensibly to find out how the clinic is run. But basically he came to elicit support because within his ranks was a radical person with ANC leanings who was in contact with us. By the way, this fellow ultimately came to Parliament with us in 1994, but is dead now. I forget his name, I will tell you just now. I love my tea but I have yet to come across anybody who can drink tea as much as Lucas Mangope. Charming guy. Motivations very deep. I could endorse the need to identify the weaknesses in our own ranks, and let me define the ranks by using the word `black`. With the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement how would sensitive people respond to the exclusion of some people because of race and the inclusion of people like Lucas Mangope and Chief Gatsha Buthelezi in the ranks of the movement. But what was worse, years and years before that, I had the occasion to meet with George Matanzima at a legal office in Durban. This was a legal office where the current Judge Lewis Skweyiya was then an articled clerk. In the early 60's he was struggling to do a medical course, and he changed and became a lawyer. I was one of those people who persuaded him to go to the bar. There are some things in my filing cabinet which I still have to locate. I ensured that he had six months keep, in terms of rent and his motor car instalments. They became very close friends and associates and I used to ask people like Lewis and Griffiths to please help us understand this. There was no formidable answer, even from people like Steve Biko. There is a term, selective morality. I didn't mind people having that, you can have that if you so wish. You could engage in the ceremonies of identification of people because of skin colour. Oppression, yes, that was on the base of our skin colour. The resolution of those problems was beyond skin colour and the ritual of identifying people as black. I think it was a ritual. Now in that context the call for clemency, what did one have to do? Could we get mobilisation going, could we get clemency, could we get the release, could we get the unbanning by self-perpetuation by the likes of us and self-identification with the likes of us? You couldn't do it, you had to make headway. How do we weaken the opposition

was another question. But we had to address it. I couldn't get consensus on this but because we had taken a formal decision in the days of deepest repression, to call for the release, to call for the unbanning of organisations and for the return of exiles and to call for the unbanning of individual. We were taking the decision in principle. The *modus operandi* to do that signature campaign, the petitions, and all the things that were recommended.... A copy of a letter from Harry Oppenheimer to me written in his free hand, each page marked confidential, and the envelope marked confidential on the top and on the bottom.

IAIN: Now I only have the envelope of that.

MEWA: Now that letter was taken as evidence for me in the Treason Trial and I believe many of those letters that were photocopied and taken away for the Treason Trial are lurking around somewhere. The original I believe could have been taken by the police when I was in jail, when my home was raided.

IAIN: This is the envelope.

MEWA: Ja this is the envelope. This is from Harry Oppenheimer. Now I had a meeting with him at 44 Main Street – isn't that one page?

IAIN: Page 5.

MEWA: Signed by him.

IAIN: Ja it is signed by him.

MEWA: Well I don't know where the balance of the pages are, what does it read there?

IAIN: It reads. It's the letterhead: Milkwood House, Forest Drive, Umhlanga. Staying on until Wednesday the 17<sup>th</sup>. I look forward to seeing you at that time. Yours sincerely, Harry Oppenheimer.

MEWA: Well that was the letter. Now after having met with him and motivated him to support us. He didn't commit himself then but he wrote back and said in principle I accept what you are saying but I am not satisfied that Nelson Mandela and the others qualify for this because of their background and the things that they did. But the very fact that I could go up to him as an industrialist and go up to people like Professor Van Zyl Slabbert at the University of Stellenbosch and to Chris Barnard as a heart surgeon and to Robert Selby Taylor as a Church leader and to the Head of the Institute of Race Relations who was a person called to

Dr van Wyk. He was somebody's father-in-law, a very prominent man. Now a whole spectrum of people from across the political landscape, van Zyl Slabbert was a little lone person then, he was a lecturer at Stellenbosch University and he must tell you. Frances Wilson must tell you as to how and why in those circumstances I came to Parliament. This very Parliament. It was not Parliament for me, it was a site of struggle, I was taking me and my point of view right into the heart of power. Frances Wilson was my host. He is Monica Wilson's son. He's still around. David Welsh was an academic, here at UCT. He and Frances Wilson helped me to make contact with these guys in the hierarchy.

IAIN: In the hierarchy of what?

MEWA: Of the National Party here, because I had documented evidence to substantiate my assumption that what I was doing was replete with integrity and a recall for the history of the National Party. Right from D F Malan himself, who had accused the United Party government of abusing the Rule of Law, or disregarding the Rule of Law. D F Malan himself had said this publicly when he was a librarian Graff Rienet. And I was given to understand then and nobody has proved otherwise to this day, that the first congratulatory message to Lenin on the success of the Bolshevik Revolution was sent to Lenin by D F Malan, who was a padre in Graff Rienet. I didn't hesitate to illustrate that by doing this D F Malan didn't become a communist revolutionary.

IAIN: I didn't know that D F Malan was ...

MEWA: Well ...

IAIN: When you go to these people you've a moral point you want to make and you place the call for clemency in a non-party political way. You never expected them all to agree, but even if they didn't you were reminding them that the moral question remained, even if they chose not to see it?

MEWA: Yes, lest we forget our history.

IAIN: You were talking in terms of them being leaders. Our leaders. And so were people in jail.

MEWA: All the time. For the first time I guess; and please do not construe this as arrogance, when I pronounced at Jamieson Hall that there will be no resolution to our country's problems without the direct participation of the ANC on the one hand and the system and the regime in South Africa on the other hand.

IAIN: That was thirty years before it happened.

MEWA: That is thirty three years before that happened. Thirty two years before that happened! Of course it gives me a sense of pride and of course it bolsters my ego, because I am human. I mean I am not going to deny that what I said then was from the bottom of my heart and from the depth of my being. That no resolution was going to take place without the direct participation of the ANC. This was said when Tambo was abroad, this was said when the ANC had not become non-racial, it was still uni-racial. But it had a vision. The Freedom Charter did not exclude Afrikaans-speakers, white people - it was not exclusionary it was all embracive. Now in 1989 when I had the privilege of addressing the ANC National Executive in Lusaka, when I was leaving I said `Comrades, I am going back home, the next time I come back I want to take you back home`. OK some of them were younger than me in age, Zuma was younger than me in age, Chris Hani, Steve Tshwete and all those guys were younger than me in age, fair enough, maybe they were polite to me and said `Ah let's listen to this guy because he's just a romantic`. And in the context of that so-called romanticism, if you kill the romance in politics, you have no politics. If you kill the vision in politics, you have no politics. You kill the sentiment – as spirituality and self- belief - you have very little left. And they had prepared a beautiful lunch for me, in the wilds of Zambia, in the knowledge that I was going back to South Africa. Remember at this stage Govan Mbeki was released, and Walter Sisulu and that group were released.

IAIN: You make a call for clemency, not a release of political prisoners *per se*, or clemency *per se*. There is a broader issue: magnanimity. It is not a cold political calculation.

MEWA: The whole February 2 thing?

IAIN: Yes.

MEWA: The whole February 2 thing, yes. When President Mandela refused to be released if the ANC was not unbanned, that didn't preclude the release of Govan Mbeki in 1987 and the release of Walter Sisulu and others in 1989.

IAIN: I am thinking of the P W Botha offer.

MEWA: Of being released in the Transkei

IAIN: That and renouncing violence.



MEWA: Well there were two episodes that come to mind on that issue which I will leave now because I have got three minutes left to do this speech.