

**Edited Interview Transcript of Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards,  
Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African  
Parliament, Cape Town, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2003**

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TAPES 19,20 & 21/32

TAPE 1

IAIN: I would like to start off at the point where you decide to restart the NIC. When was that?

MEWA: Well I cannot discount the reality of the Call for Clemency. The very fact that this campaign was launched in Cape Town, and again at Wits in Johannesburg, and in Grahamstown, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, and a whole range of other places told me something. Indeed there were little committees formed all around. There was the idea that they would transform themselves one day into some form of structure, but there had to be something to hold on to. Until then what I was seeking to highlight was that South Africa was a place of what I termed `spiritual disunity`. This `spiritual disunity` was manifest in political structures. I am not talking spirituality in the dogmatic exclusively religious sense. I am talking of the kind of spirituality relevant for all time, for all people, at all levels. I would talk of the divinity in each person. Other would say that God appears in the images of people. We were told that South Africa was the last bastion of Christian civilisation or the only bastion of Christian civilisation on the African continent. It was a false idea of oneself.

But this was a deep conviction in me. Now having mobilised successfully in many parts of the country, there was something of a ripple effect. The consciousness of people was raised. And the way to measure the depth of this raised level of consciousness was to evaluate the state's responses to it and the state's responses to this were wide and varied. Their own allies and the surrogates in the black community became apprehensive. The State refused to release our political leaders. Vorster refused to give me an appointment to discuss the issues. As a fellow South African I referred to myself in my communications with him as a fellow South African, we owed this to ourselves and to our children and our great grandchildren and all the children that would follow. That at least we must begin talking with each other.

The question arose as to what we do after the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1971, having raised this kind of mobilisation of people on the single idea. We were not talking ANC, we were not talking NIC, we were not talking confrontational politics. I was talking about co-operational politics. How do we as fellow South Africans cooperate to ensure that South Africa belongs to all who live in it? And the Freedom Charter didn't exclude the Vorster's from South Africa. And I thought this needed to be told often enough to jolt people into the reality that we were looking for. In consultation with colleagues in Durban we had to reflect on what after 31<sup>st</sup> May 1971? We

couldn't revive the ANC because it was banned, but we could revive the one component of the Congress alliance which had declared its adherence to the Freedom Charter but had never been banned. Its leadership was, and this has been misinterpreted in many places, especially in the media or by the writers of the time who opposed that move. This was so even though we had a mandate - a unanimous mandate – from the people who were present at the meeting to form on a non-racial basis. The believed that an invocation to recall to our history was very important, albeit at that stage only in the Indian community because of the various forces operating on all of us. But the fact that the meeting declared for a non-racial organisation, was history in itself. Now how is it done? How is it done? One cannot discount that a person in Khayalitsha or Soweto were not insensitive to the call for the release of our political leaders. So as an interim measure there was concurrence amongst us to revive the NIC.

So the process we engaged in was this. I called a meeting of like-minded people, about six or seven people. This meeting was held in my home at Phoenix Settlement. I ensured that I had at least one trade unionist, at least one or two civic leaders, a professional person, members of the youth and we met at Phoenix Settlement within the first week of June of 1971. That meeting was a failure. There were diverse views, especially coming from one journalist ...

IAIN: Who was there?

MEWA: Well MR Moodley as a civic leader, Bandu as a trade unionist, [INAUDIBLE] as a student leader, George Sewpersadh as the professional person, with MJ Naidoo, and Bill Reddy as an academic, teacher. That was at the second meeting. The first meeting was three or four people who poured water onto the entire idea.

IAIN: And who were they?

MEWA: They were people like the late .... and what have you because we tried to reach out to them. And I didn't want to get involved in any fights and compromises. But the second meeting elected me as chairperson of this *ad hoc* committee. And I think in fairness to everybody we took the first decision unanimously. To revive the Natal Indian Congress, we were at one on that.

IAIN: That was agreed?

MEWA: That was agreed on. The process now was to hold this public meeting. We had simultaneous processes running to reach out to people in different areas, and solicit ideas

from them about how to do it, the mandatory public meetings. We cannot do so, this one small group of people.

IAIN: Now this is the first group of six people?

MEWA: We became nine ultimately. The second group became nine, we brought in other people. But I didn't want to be accused, and I am certain that a group of nine people did not want to be accused at that stage of being just a small clique of people who took this decision for whatever reason and to do this. We thought it was wrong historically. But in order to ensure that we did not run afoul of protocol we went out to the existing leadership of the now defunct NIC, intimated to them that this is how we propose to do it, and what is your view? The first person that I went to solicit his view from was the existing president Dr Naicker. He he was banned, and he said it is a very good thing to do and I received his blessings. Present with me was another banned person, now very elderly, but still alive, AKM Docrat and a whole range of other people. I went up to one person to ask for the last updated constitution.

This person said to me that it was not around, and it was given to some grouping from the United States of America, and there was no such document around. So I looked high and low. I met a teacher, a history teacher in Verulam who was a friend of mine - he was the secretary of Phoenix Settlement at that stage. He said `Yes, I have a copy; it is in a crate at the school. It doesn't belong to me, it belongs to so and so, all these documents`. And I said to him but so and so had just told me that the documents are abroad and not here. I said `Look I do not want to fight about this but can I just have a copy of it?`

IAIN: And the American issue?

MEWA: That was the story given to me, and Mr Singh gave me a copy of it. I made copies of it.

IAIN: Before you've even gathered this group, didn't you have – let's use the word a `kitchen cabinet`?

MEWA: Well there were a lot of people around at that stage. Rowley Arenstein was one of them. Sydney Dunn another, he belonged to the coloured community. Griffiths was out from jail by then, and banned. And Lewis Skweyiya and Florence Mkhize, and of course George Sewpersadh in the Indian community.

IAIN: And these were people you were close enough to for you to chat over an idea?

MEWA: Yes and there were young people, who were all living products of the work camps at Phoenix. They were young people. We realised that this would be a good intervention, and with that kind of encouragement, there is no doubt that it succeeded. I am being a little bit vague about this, not because I want to be vague, but whilst there was co-operation from across the racial line, there was some resistance within the Indian community itself because at that stage there was what was called the SAIC which feared the emergence of the NIC as an alternative to them. As far as we were concerned we are not an alternate to anybody. We are just going to evoke our history. If others were to consider themselves as alternates to us they are welcome to do so. We went by our historical experience. Now in 1971, I myself was 39 years of age, cocky and in some people's eyes brash. And yet the people I was working with said `Now here is a guy who has got some courage and those people are mobilised`. Now the question of accountability, of legitimacy, and the invoking of history became important. This *ad hoc* committee, for god knows why, made me the chairperson of the *ad hoc* committee. We were aided, assisted, and abetted by a whole range of people. People like Rick Turner who was a radical leftist, who had given a hand to establish SASO and consolidate the black consciousness movement.

But the paradox of it all is here. That in that context SASO had established itself embryonically. There were little pockets throughout the townships. NUSAS was a long-established student body. And Phoenix Settlement was bursting with activity which was reaching out to into the other areas. So in order for the *ad hoc* committee to consolidate the NIC in the minds of the community it had to own the process. In order to own the process we said we needed to have a mass meeting from as wider a field as we possibly can. Advertise it as widely as we can and try to bring people to a single venue to say jay or nay. In those days resources were not available. I talked to Harriet Bolton, a trade unionist, to give us the free use of a hall which she agreed to do – Bolton Hall at that stage on Albert Street and Prince Edward Street corner. We asked other people to do the printing, which was done. We asked people to distribute. We had no activists then so we had to put pamphlets in busses which were headed in different directions from the bus rank in Durban to say please take one and pass the rest.

IAIN: And basically Harriet is using the resources of the then government legislated TUCSA unions, which had a huge following within the Indian community.

MEWA: Well, yes and for people to allege that we were not worker based is a whole lot of hogwash. There was no seating, there was no standing space in the hall on a very, very rainy afternoon on a Sunday, on a stormy afternoon with wind and rain, so stormy and so wet that it was not possible to cross the street without getting soaked and we thought that nobody would

come. The meeting was advertised for three o'clock and at quarter to three there were only four people.

IAIN: On a Saturday afternoon?

MEWA: On a Sunday afternoon and it was disturbing but by quarter past three, and remember they were not bussed. We had no resources to bus people. If they came they had to come there on their own steam whether they were workers, business people, professionals or whoever they were. By quarter past three there was no standing space in the hall and they crossed the political economic social spectrum. And we had a unanimous mandate to do this. One of the mandates given to us was that the process must be adopted. Of course we had thought through this *modus operandi* for it to be approved. This was in June, between June and July, and we said a national conference of branches must be established to legitimate the Natal Indian Congress with a minimum number of members as stipulated in the constitution of the then defunct NIC.

IAIN: In order to then formally inaugurate ...

MEWA: Inaugurate, re-launch the NIC. By the time we would get our act together we were left with a month. We entered August and there was still preparatory or preliminary meetings, discussions, mobilisations, resources, there was a task that we had to do on all levels. I think it was the salutary thing for the Indian community. Their response was salutary. That in thirty one days prior to the launch we established twenty nine branches. Now the inspiration was this. That in a place like Port Shepstone, we had half a dozen volunteers and between them they had offers of many free venues in which to hold meetings.

IAIN: All competing with each other.

MEWA: Competing with each other to be associated with this resurgence of a movement which could capture and channel their own aspirations.

IAIN: This is very different to the NIC started by Gandhi.

MEWA: I am not going judge Gandhi on this one.

IAIN: No I am not asking you to. A comparison, I am not asking you to judge him.

MEWA: Gandhi had established an NIC relevant to the times at that stage. He himself realised that inasmuch as it is very important to mobilise everybody, that the pre-eminent

consideration was the workers, the miners and the sugar workers. Even though its embryo was of a different nature, it changed character given the circumstances in which he had operated. Having learnt from those experiences, having learnt from the experiences of its own mutation after 1946, that where it went to and why and how it was recaptured by the so called `Young Turks` within the trade union movement and so forth. The worker aspirations; business aspirations, and naturally we offered insights into the accumulative experience of those people. But the point that I am making here – I will give you an illustration. The revival meeting in Stanger was convened by the local people in Stanger. They had a committee who identified key people in that area, who were respected and what have you and to whom people could listen to and relate to. They mobilised two or three of them to form the catalyst, the embryo, of the Stanger branch. But this was the fascinating part. The person who became an Executive member of the NIC was an employer owning vast acres, having large numbers of workers - both Indian and African – on a very large sugar farm. When I say large I mean a serious estate. This man had to sit on a bench alongside his workers at this meeting. I don't think he had ever done that before, sitting cheek by jowl.

As a speaker at that meeting in Stanger I used that very illustration as an illustration to show how our destinies are linked. The significance of the re-emergence of Congress was and is best illustrated by the fact that an employer and employee, both of whom happened to be of Indian origin, could sit together to decide their common political destiny. The founding branch meeting in Redhill was held in a park. One enthusiastic young adherent had said that it could be held in his garage, but he had not had the permission of his father. And it emerged that it was his father who was our catalyst in that area, and who spoke at that meeting.

IAIN: You were there?

MEWA: I was there. When I arrived I realised that there was a problem between father and son and I apologised on behalf of the son and on behalf of the *ad hoc* committee that it should not be done like this. We should not alienate people. We should not create tensions between parents and children. And the final nail of the opponents of the revival of the NIC in Redhill was that when we had to read the resolution that this gathering comprised of so and so and so and so it was in excess of fifty or sixty people, when we required only twenty five. The Redhill branch of the NIC was established. And this resolution was read under street lights which were very dim and then we had to focus our motor car lights on the person who was reading out the resolution. The meeting in Inanda from where I hailed was held under an orange tree under a paraffin lamp. The meeting in Chatsworth - there was no Phoenix in those days - was held on a football ground, sitting on our haunches on a football ground with the security police lurking over us. The final meeting, the conference itself, was scheduled to be held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1971 to coincide with Ghandi's birthday. On the 15<sup>th</sup> September I

was re-banned and house arrested. They made a mistake. They house arrested me in Phoenix Settlement because that was where I lived. They didn't know where the official launch of the NIC was going to take place. It took place at Phoenix Settlement. I was present in spirit and in body only a spitting distance away on my veranda.

IAIN: What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Indian community, in a political sense, at that time?

MEWA: An evaluation might mean an imputation on people and the leadership at the time. This I do not want to do. But one cannot ignore the circumstances in which the leadership of the NIC and TIC were banned. The weaknesses in the Indian community at that stage were wide and varied. They had by then become willing or at least a sector of them had become willing recipients of the spoils of the Group Areas Act. Inasmuch as property owning people were dispossessed. The working class were given homes in Chatsworth. They were no longer going to be at the beck and call of landowners. They chose, gladly, they gladly chose to be a tenant of the State, in this case, the Durban City Council. My late brother who lived in Chatsworth and got married in 1954/55 was one such example, my own brother. When he left my parent's home after his marriage, he too became an employee of a furniture firm but chose to live as a tenant of the City Council. There is no point in me talking about other people. The people in Cato Manor were removed from there and placed into homes with four walls and a roof in Chatsworth. No matter how poor the environment was in terms of social amenities, no matter how inadequate there were, there was a cheese and chalk difference between Magazine Barracks and Chatsworth. In the meantime there were protests about dispossessions and the Group Areas Act. There is no doubt of the fact. There was acquisition again on the one hand and there was loss on the other hand. Now the implications of this must tell on any organisation that would have championed the cause of a particular community with this kind of economic diversity. The State was no fool. They were no fools but the vast majority of people in that period in our history were people who belonged to the acquisitive class and the small minority of people who lost to the implementation of the Group Areas Act were the property class. When the Group Areas Act was enacted in 1950, it meant the literal dispossession or removal of the property class, especially from the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

The one horrible implication of this was they were also becoming house owners. There is nothing wrong with that. The implementers of the Group Areas Act and the people that established Chatsworth brought in something which in fact became an instrument to destroy the social fabric of the working class. Where they would join families and pool resources, salaries and wages, living together, it split them up. It became a cultural offence in those circumstances for a child who was married and earning a separate income to be living with

his own father in his father's home. This was one vulgarity which I drew attention to. It went on like wildfire because the benefits of a joint family system far outweighed the disadvantages or the advantages of the nuclear family system. So what was being attacked at that stage, and I didn't hesitate to say this, because we believed that the NIC belonged to everybody including the business class so we didn't want to ignore them and we reminded them. As a result of which we were really surprised, I personally as the Chairperson of the *Ad Hoc* Committee, was really surprised at the kind of enthusiasm and response from the business committee, from the professional people, from the working class people. You know, one day when somebody has the time to go into the details of this, to find out as to how it was possible for people to leave Durban on a cold winter night, have their first breakfast feeding in Ladysmith and then proceed to have a lunch hour meeting in Newcastle and to return for a mid-afternoon tea meeting in Greytown and then to come for dinner meeting on the same day in Pietermaritzburg and succeed in creating catalysts in all these areas where we had branches formed.

IAIN: How did you select them?

MEWA: Intuition. I think it was just intuition. People whom I liked. People whom I could care about. The vast majority of them, they were my contemporaries at the University, or some of them my junior. George was a university student in my days but not as active as we were. Billy Naidoo was active in student days. He read his first paper on community health at the University of Natal Medical School in the 1960's and somebody must ask him who helped him draft the paper. But one nasty thing happened and I personally was very upset by it. At the mandatory meeting something was emerging which I couldn't lay my hands on until that afternoon. On the stage, we had the entire *Ad Hoc* Committee. We had made one error. We didn't have females. We were not gender sensitive. This I could live with and forgive myself and rectify it. But one bright spark, towards the end of the meeting, after the mandate was given, stood up to question the integrity of the *Ad Hoc* Committee by posing this question. The question was: 'Why is there no person of Muslim persuasion on your Committee?' So I looked around and I said, well you are right, there are no Muslims here. But I promise we will look into that. As Chairperson I disallowed a discussion, I ruled that there will be no discussion of this but I give you an undertaking that this *Ad Hoc* Committee will look into it. First thing Monday morning, I sat on the telephone to all those people, all those compatriots in the Indian community who happened to be Muslims and I phoned them. I said gentlemen, 'I have a problem. I do not want to subject myself to this kind of tyranny of being accused of not having Muslims on this Committee. And people referred to this as my committee, it is not my committee. I will be compelled to expose all of you whom I invited to become members of this committee'.



IAIN: You'd already asked them?

MEWA: Yes and in pure fright Hoosein came. He said 'I am sorry we will', and he became a corporate member of the *Ad Hoc* Committee with the revival of the Congress. He came with me to meet with [INAUDIBLE], and George came with me. 'I want to give you exposure that you belong to the NIC', I said. I telephoned the others, I would rather not mention their names, but at that meeting when this was raised I made an announcement: 'All those people who are present here who are keen on establishing branch structures of the NIC here are books'. I left the books on a table. 'Whichever area you belong to please leave your name and address so that we can be in contact with you'. That is how Jerry Coovadia became a member of the NIC by leaving his name and address and I phoned him to say I am coming to see you. That is how he became a member there.

IAIN: But they are not there at the beginning. The person who asked that question, had that person ...

MEWA: I challenged him to join and he joined.

IAIN: Did they?

MEWA: Yes.

IAIN: A woman?

MEWA: A man. A man and they did join. Let's think about protocol and you have got to be very careful to do everything right because people can trip you up on protocol and in any community there are certain codes about things that you do and the way you do it. I think it was because of our sensitivity to that very fact. But let not ideas become destroyed by personal vagaries or personalities, including mine. This was an outward conformity, it was an inner felt need, and I am happy to say that each one of us on the *Ad Hoc* Committee were at one with that view.

IAIN: Now this other group that later on, if I got you right, what happened?

MEWA: No they didn't join at all. They became supportive from a distance.

IAIN: But they were quite influential people?

MEWA: Well journalists, and another had just become a lawyer. Before the revival of the NIC, I remember driving him up in that nine month period of freedom, so-called, to Pietermaritzburg to reflect on whether to take on the case of a child, high school child, little girl who was involved with the Call for Clemency and the organisation of the campaign amongst students in Pietermaritzburg. And the security police got at her and her parents warned me and I took this lawyer to intervene and find out as to how we could be of assistance to this child and her parents. So it was not easy sailing. That is Mr [NAME WITHHELD] was one of the people who said no, he doesn't believe that the revival of the NIC should be done and he gave reasons that we should just be a body of people doing research and all that stuff. And he didn't.

IAIN: This in the meeting with those people who poured cold water on it?

MEWA: It is the first meeting.

IAIN: The first meeting.

MEWA: First meeting of three or four or five or six people in my house over tea. Said no, I didn't accept that no.

IAIN: Where is Fatima Meer?

MEWA: Nowhere. Full stop.

## TAPE 2

IAIN: So you were analysing the way the Group Areas Acts had changed Indian politics. Tell me more.

MEWA: There was a constancy of this question in the minds people who were prepared to think and not willing to live in fear; the few that thought about this, that is. Land was being bought, and by whom? So the property people who had become adherents of the NIO, the Natal Indian Organisation - to have an objective and dispassionate assessment - why did they support the NIO? In my view it was purely to have an ally to protect their properties. And there could have been no better ally for the NIO than successive white governments, local and national, in the country. That is where they looked in the knowledge that, in relative terms, white population faced a similar problem in South Africa as the Indian propertied class here. So this commonality gave rise to a common fear. And that continued into the times of the SAIC.

The 1949 riots between Africans and Indians had been a significant moment. They had watched the rise of Indian trade unions, the `Young Turks`, they had witnessed the emerging aspirations of the African fraternity, they had witnessed the emergence of challenging ideas from within the ANC, the NIC, with the Communist Party for South Africa. But above all they had also witnessed the process of decolonisation internationally, spearheaded by a person who was a gift from South Africa to India and who became the father of the Indian nation, who in fact presided over the dissolution of the British Empire. In the same period we had the conclusion of the last World War, and the beginnings of the Cold War, where new global alliances were created. And if those alliances could take place there, then anything was possible in South Africa. And I think it will only be the fool who says to himself or herself that the Afrikaners: the Van der Merwe's and the Muller's, were fools. They were no fools. I am given to understand that many of them had fine library collections.

So basically the SAIC cannot be viewed in isolation from all these events. It was national self – determination: one nation, many cultures, and the struggles to protect privileges through alliances. The Freedom Charter, on the other hand, said one un-split geographical and political whole, with one constitution, in the knowledge that the country belongs to all who live in it. And if the country belonged to all who lived in it, a cause that we were espousing, where did the SAIC fit in? They didn't believe in one person, one vote. They didn't believe in universal suffrage. They didn't accept that South Africa belonged to all who lived in it. Perhaps they did in a way, with qualifications, that some people must have greater protection than other people. Viewed in the context, those years later – in 1971 - when an industrialist banker, whose wife served with me on the Campaign for Clemency could have the strength of character to say to me, `Be a bit more patient and please reflect on the positive aspects of the Pass Laws`. Understand this – we must - how an international accepted business person, a national hero in the business world – and whose child I brought up in the Phoenix Settlement work camps, and in whose room I had dinner as his guest. Now if that was so, globally for South Africa, how much more so for the short term, short sighted interests with the supporters of the SAIC?.

IAIN: This is a big change from Indian attitudes when the Nats came to power.?

MEWA: At that stage they were in a doldrums. A fair number of them identified them with the communist movement. There is no doubt of the fact. I am not saying others didn't support the National Party government because of fear. I think they did. In some ways I think either genetically or sociologically the person of Indian origin in South Africa can in some ways be characterised as a racist. They lived with Africans in Cato Manor, together but I think with attitude.

When by the mid-1950's the Congress Alliance too shape and with the adoption of the Freedom Charter, it offered a new kind of unity. But, not any one community in South Africa had a normal culture politically. They were not homogeneous. There was no homogeneity politically, including African people. There was this polarisation: differences and what have you. The Indian community was no exception. What the Congress Alliance offered, and the Freedom Charter spoke of was a political empathy across communities.

Now that had to be destroyed. Because I think there is immeasurable truth in the perception held by the hierarchy that separately we can deal with them, but together they are dynamite.

IAIN: When you re-launch the NIC what's the SAIC response?

MEWA: Neutered initially, thinking that is the ambivalence of youth, and it will wither away. It didn't happen that way and I don't think they estimated what measurable success we would have. So much so that in the first annual conference in 1972, held in the Gandhi Hall in Queen Street. Lots of system orientated people like the late Dr ... .

IAIN: Gandhi Library or the Gandhi Hall?

MEWA: The Gandhi Library in Queen Street. Lots of system orientated people came seeking to persuade, to use the legitimacy of the NIC's name and history, to try to persuade the people to enter the system. To use the system, to change from within. They failed at that stage. There could have been some successes. There could have been some positive aspects to it. People like me had become banned again. I did not believe then and I do not believe now that without a disciplined set of cadres that strategy - for it had to be made into a strategy - it would have succeeded. I used the argument again in 1983 whilst I was still a banned person when NIC colleagues like George Singh were told that I was one of the proponents of entry-ism into the Tri-cameral parliament in 1983 - just before the launch of the UDF!

I was still a banned and house arrested. And a person came to my home in Verulam at 5 o'clock in the morning saying to me that `It is clear amongst the cadres of the NIC who do not want enter the tri-cameral system that I am the real problem because I have begun to rethink whether we should or should not enter the tri cam`. Because by that stage the new `Young Turks` led by people like Pravin Gordhan were developing strategic thoughts on the matter of system-orientated politics.

IAIN: `PG`?

MEWA: Well he led the move, he led the move. I did a document on this.

IAIN: To participate in the Tri-cameral parliament?

MEWA: I did a document on this as to under what circumstances one should and why one shouldn't.

IAIN: There is a letter by you in your papers.

MEWA: I don't know where the paper is at the moment.

IAIN: I've got it, its fine.

MEWA: These were my questions. Point 1: `Do we have an adequate number of cadres amongst us who will have the legitimacy of the community through the ballot box to enter the system and to indicate to the people who are in control of the system that we in fact have the authority of the majority of the Indian community in South Africa? Point 2: `Do we have an adequate number of disciplined cadres who say that we are going to enter the system, not because we want it to work, but we want it to be used for the advancement of the democratic cause. Point 3: And in doing so, for those of us who enter, how will be accountable to a group outside of that system from whom we will receive instructions, particularly should we falter in there? Point 4: Will the group which enters be sustained by the movement, and not become dependent on the wages or the salaries that we are going to earn there? That we will turn over whatever we earn there for the community to decide as to how much we should keep for ourselves. The cadres will go in there and will take no decisions on policy on any issue that divides the South African fraternity, even though they will be sitting in an Indians-only House, to decide only on Indian affairs. Point 5: Do we have that number of cadres amongst us who are going to be disciplined enough to begin to initiate legislation in these institutions which will be directly opposed to existing legislation. Or will strategic entry-ism quickly produce Indian hirelings?

Now remember Chief Gatsha Buthelezi had come to my work camps, had given a Gandhi Memorial Lecture. Lucas Mangope had come and had cups and cups and cups of tea in my home, and was already part and parcel of the system. There was enough evidence to establish for us that this was not possible.

IAIN: In your papers there is an extraordinary number of news clippings and a huge collection of articles on what the tri-cameral structure would look like and so forth. You're analysing these things extensively?

MEWA: It was the genesis of the entry-ist strategic option. I was banned and house arrested I had the opportunity to be conduct research. Lots of pressure was put onto me at that stage, even from people I respected, like Rowley Arenstein. He gave me Russian examples. I rejected that out of hand. We do know this as to what had happened to a very large number of people in African communities. Had we gone the route of the tri-cam, and given the African experiences in Urban Bantu Councils and the like as a justification, but I think we ourselves would have lost the moral high ground of the Congress movement. Notwithstanding that the ANC itself had over the years people in the system. So these were my arguments against it.

My arguments for it and I had arguments for it was that it will give us the scope to mobilise people and channel them into the Congress mould. It will give us the protection from repression. It will give us the resources provided by the State to mobilise our people. It will give us the venues which were denied us at the time. It will give us the opportunity to move around freely. It would have given us the opportunity not to be re-banned, and re-house arrested.

IAIN: These are practical opportunities. What would other arguments be?

MEWA: I don't think there is a progressive argument. I don't believe there was. I think at that stage it was easy for us to mobilise people. In my banned state, here is a funny example. When the Housing Action Committees were established in the Indian community. First were established them in the new apartheid-built residential areas: in Chatsworth the Chatsworth Housing Action Committee, and in Phoenix the Phoenix Working Committee. In 1977, after the 1976 floods, there were a couple of hundred homes, or a thousand homes, which were badly damaged. In fact some were swept away. We had people on the ground in these areas. I am talking 1977, by which time I'd moved to Verulam. I myself, because of the nature of my work, had to have two cars. I drove in my own car, it was fairly biggish but very big in Phoenix township and surely it was insensitive, to be very kind to myself, to drive in Phoenix township with this car. I bought it for my kids actually when they insisted that I have one.

IAIN: What car was it?

MEWA: A Dodge. But I had a smaller car which I generally used. I was half way through to Phoenix township when I turned back saying to myself `I'm using the wrong car. This is a lesson for you that it all depends on what cars you drive as to how you relate to people`. I

was a banned person but I went into the home of these two people – Billy and George - ostensibly to meet them to sell insurance. I made appointments with them and then a larger group came into my home in Verulam. Mr Singh, Mr - I forget, and one or two other people, including Pravin, Yunus Mohammed, Preggs Govender, and so forth. So began community action groups, in many ways based on my experiences from the Phoenix Settlement work camps. At that stage there were already two factions working at Springfield among the flood victims. There was the Flood Relief Committee from the municipality and the other one was a community based one, where there were tensions. There were many. And I said to them, `You can go out now, it is eight o'clock, nine o'clock at night to that area and identify a group of people to work with. The people that you identify must know the community. You are not going to intervene there and say `Look here is a blanket`. They have got to establish their needs. We know the overwhelming needs, we are aware of it, we are sensitive. But they have got to decide as to what are their immediate needs. If there are measurable goods with which to help them, who will manage them, how will the distribution take place? But not you, and not me. They have got to work. From now onwards in whatever you do, as a group or as individuals, you have got to give me the undertaking that you are not going to become the unity in the community. You can go there now and say to them, provided this happens, you will have the immediate delivery the following day of the basic medical requirements provided for them as a gift from well- wishers outside of that area, including the Mahatma Gandhi Clinic`. This they did.

Something else also emerged. Unemployment was rife. We identified people there that got in food, got in groceries, and mobilised the community, the business community there, to donate these things. Now these for me were all political acts. Against that background, I think they must have realised, the youngsters must have realised, that it is not easy to work politically outside of the system. And we didn't pretend that it was going to be easy. We made it very clear that the hazards and the consequences of doing this kind of work are many.

IAIN: At the same time, without mentioning names, there are people who are politicking in a very different way.

MEWA: Yes in Springfield, in Tin Town. Yes.

IAIN: Prominent people who are using their influence?

MEWA: Sure.

IAIN: To stop you?

MEWA: Yeah.

IAIN: Why?

MEWA: Not to stop me, not to stop me but to stop these youngsters from working there. These youngsters were people with vision, they were full of energy, they belonged to the Congress Alliance movement in all but name. And they were members of the Communist Party. They had a whole range of diverse experiences outside of experiences of the people who were working trying to see if they could work within the system.

IAIN: What is the process of electing the first president of the newly re-launched NIC?

MEWA: The new president was elected at Phoenix Settlement on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1971. The branches were present, nominations took place, and George Sewpersadh was the first elected President of the NIC in 1971.

IAIN: Ok fine, now for public record. Why didn't you want to stand?

MEWA: I was banned by then and house arrested. No, no, no to be fair, to be fair. By that same token we should have, if you think, that I should have been ...

IAIN: I am playing devil's advocate

MEWA: Yeah, which I respect. I could have, but being banned and what have you it would have been incumbent on me to keep the seat vacant. Or allow an acting president.

IAIN: As with Luthuli?

MEWA: As with Luthuli, right. Now that was not discussed with me. I did not want to be part of the discussion but what was discussed with me before the conference, a day or two before the conference, was the question of whether they should not elect Sushila Gandhi as the President. I said I had no principled position against her becoming the President of Congress. `But it is you who must reflect on this`. The revival of the NIC could not be dependent on any one individual. I was fasting then, I was a bit weak, but mentally not, and I told them `If this conference was going to be held to elect the new officer bearers is going to declare that, then in fact you are declaring your weaknesses. All you guys from the different branches could not throw up another person to take over the responsibility of leading congress!` George was elected.



IAIN: A new man, as it were.

MEWA: Absolutely. Leadership becomes shared and not centralised for any one individual or any one family. They could not make the mistake of having a dynastic approach to the leadership of congress. And the NIC was not formed on the strength of any one other organisation. The theological seatbelt was the `Call for Clemency`. It was in my view the finest vehicle to channel and mobilised people into the charisma of our leadership in prison, on the island, island and the depth of morality of the congress movement and the strength of the Freedom Charter.

Even though it was my advice to the *Ad Hoc* Committee before conference not to have the Freedom Charter distributed freely at Phoenix Settlement on the day. We did not know which one of the Charters, there were two Charters - one was banned - so we did not know which one was the altered one. There was an altered charter floating around at the time. And it so happened. Much against our wishes the fraudulent Charter surfaced at Phoenix that day. The place was teeming with security police. They kept vigilance on us. It was a public meeting. Because this happened it was my advice to them to distance themselves from any document that did not emanate from the *Ad Hoc* Committee. This happened in 1971. In 1983 the Freedom Charter was unbanned, and the person who led the move to see the Charter unbanned was a person who subsequently became the Counsel in my Treason Trial case, Gilbert Marcus.

So in 1971 it was a very touch and go situation. But the point I am trying to make is our politics was not a reaction to the existence of the SAIC. Ours was not reaction to the emergence of conservative system-orientated political tendencies. Inasmuch as we drew attention to them, that was appropriate. But our focus was one our own traditions.

IAIN. Tell me about the two Freedom Charters.

MEWA: The Freedom Charter was a banned document at the time we are talking about. 1971. And we didn't know which Freedom Charter was banned, and which one was not banned.

IAIN: There were two pamphlets, both claiming to be the Freedom Charter?

MEWA: Many pamphlets, there were many pamphlets.

IAIN: Of two types?

MEWA: Many pamphlets floating around calling the community into action of this kind and then this another kind, half of which were subversive. Any excuse to destroy the NIC. To make it stillborn. Then we became victims again.

IAIN: OK just clarify. You're suggesting that pamphlets was put out by the State

MEWA: There were several of them - provocateurs. I would be a political fool not to understand that amongst delegates running into hundreds would be a few dozen who might just be agent provocateurs. But we had nothing to hide. Besides distancing ourselves from all those documents which were not issued by us was the appropriate course of action on that day.

IAIN: And one of them is a bogus Freedom Charter?

MEWA: This is what I did. I was sitting on my veranda. I hadn't broken my fast then. I was to break my fast simultaneously with the re-launch of the NIC, later that day. I called up a few people, amongst whom was the person distributing the Charter. And I said to him `I will work with you. I don't know why you have done this but it might just be a good thing if you yourself went around and collected all the copies of the Charter from the desks, and from the tables which are laid out for the delegates`. And he did this. That person never came back to the Congress movement. Have I said enough on that?

IAIN: Yes, it's a potentially very messy situation.

MEWA: When I asked him how would you expect me to deny that this Charter was not distributed by us? I used details of the Charter in my speech. About South Africa belonging to all who live in it, while there should be equal access to education, there should be equal recognition of all cultures, learning should be open to all and there should be housing and we cannot decide on our future at the expense of other people's security. These are all issues reflected in the Charter. But it is not the Charter. Is the re-emergence of a political grouping more important than a couple of pages of paper which can be picked up and destroyed in any case and not be distributed as freely as we would have liked to do? We couldn't, we didn't.

IAIN: In the 1980's there were people, workers in Free State, who went to jail for four years for having a tea mug in green, black and gold.

MEWA: I know. I was charged for treason years later for having talked about the Charter, for having mentioned that Nelson Mandela is a gift, not only to South Africa but to the entire human race. They charged me for treason. That was part of the indictment. Now in those

days of 1971, I don't think it was a piece of cake, but on hindsight you know compared to the policies of governance, I think the politics of liberation was a piece of cake. And the re-launch of the NIC was a recall to history.

IAIN: To an organisation?

MEWA: Of an organisation which was the first in the history of African experience in the entire continent. It was a recall of history on the basis that it defined a method of struggle, critical to which was, resist evil wherever you see it. Now in 1971 they couldn't get to us directly. The NIC had never been banned.

But this is what they did. After the first annual conference in 1972 – maybe they thought we'd never get up and running beforehand - the first victim was the secretary from the Port Shepstone branches; Dr Naidoo, who had by then set up a medical practice there. They went from branch and branch and branch and picked up three people. Just to intimidate people. And then gossip as spread. 'Where was Dr Naidoo?' and all this, making him look feeble. Eventually his practise is crumbling. You get me?

That is why we also had other ways of operating. In the middle of the night we did not hesitate to go out to the dockyards of Durban to attend to the needs of striking workers, long before the 1973 strikes. People like Harold Nxasana, were employed by me in my office. He was working as a union activist and organiser. What begun as networking amongst workers, became unions. And here the important people came from a wider circle. People like Rick Turner, Halton Cheadle, Griffith Mxenge, Rowley Arenstein, Harriet Bolton. Norman Middleton. And what they did was all underwritten by the NIC, essentially from amongst ourselves. We never depended on outside funding. We did not receive a single cent from any member of the international community. All of us who committed to the revival of the NIC had put our pockets where our mouths were. Whether it was a publication or materials or the arrangement of transport or food for the national conference, they got from supporters of congress within the community.

We tried to say to the community, and in some ways we succeeded. 'Is it possible for us to have a united front against what confronts us? Maybe you cannot become a card bearing member of the NIC, maybe you cannot be an activists to distribute leaflets and knock on doors. But what you could do is perhaps help us to print. What you could do is perhaps subsidise us by funding some of these things ....'

And we also said 'And if you think you can't do those things, then it would be great if you believe we are right and you can't do those things then we ask you to keep quiet in your

opposition`. This so we could have the opportunity to say that we indeed represent the aspirations of the largest majority of people coming from Indian origin`. So the nuance, the style of political work changed. It was not only on the individual levels from person to person. It was on a community level at house meetings, it was in work camps, it was a mobilisation of resources through the relief of flood victims, it was the mobilisation of resources to establish worker education programmes, it was the mobilisation of resources to link up with people like Harry Gwala in Pietermaritzburg,

AIN: Who had just come out of jail.

MEWA: Who had just come out of jail. How does one do this without the commitment of people? You can't depend on one person.

IAIN: Where was the main office of the NIC?

MEWA: That is a funny question, it is a funny question. Until 1973 there was no office. The President of Congress was in Verulam and the secretary was in Port Shepstone, the Treasurer was somewhere around, I don't know where. And I think to be polite about this each one of us did whatever we could do. But there was a constant gravitation to the office on the fifth floor of CNR House in Prince Edward Street. That's where my office was. Rick, Barney Pityana, Steve Biko, they were always in and out. Saths Cooper had offices on the 7<sup>th</sup> Floor. But we had a particular kind of empathy, an understanding. I can't define it but when you have Steve Biko walking into my office to see Alan Paton having a cup of tea with yours truly you get the picture.

### TAPE THREE

IAIN: OK are were talking about Doc walking into your office, always wearing his cabbie cap.

MEWA: Then you have a guy like MD Naidoo, when he was released in 1972, then you have a guy like Rowley Arenstein – always in his 1950's black suit, white shirt and thin tie - who is just around the bend in Lodson House. As a young guy in that period, I was hardly forty years of age, I used to be flattered with this stuff, for different reasons. I remember one episode very vividly. Steve Biko had walked into my office and sees me having tea with Paton. When Steve Biko asked me as to what I am doing in the company of an arch liberal and I said to him, `Please don't be so rude. This is my friend, as you are`. And here is a man belonging Black Consciousness movement and then a noted liberal ... well. But then when you reflect, there is laughter coming out from different diverse sections, and that laughter was inspirational for me. It was sustaining me.

But when 1973 exploded at Coronation Brick and Tiles I got scared. I got scared, my staff got scared, because we thought we had bitten more than what we could chew. Now this was real stuff right on our doorstep, right in the middle of it. So when Coronation Brick and Tile exploded I was driving into town when I saw this red bus – a municipal one - and masses and masses of people marching into Durban with the bus behind. It couldn't get through. I took a deviation from North Coast Road and got to my office to alert the staff. The mistakes that one of the workers made according to my office – they shouldn't have done that tactically, but they did that. I had to say `Look I am banned and house arrested and I can't do this kind of work, but what I am going to do, I am going to leave my office now, I will not remain in my office. You do what you want to do in this office`. I left in Harold and Bheki's hands.

IAIN: Both employed by you as your financial agents.

MEWA: Not agents, as my assistants. They never sold insurance for me, they were my assistants. Whatever they did as my assistants was whatever they did. I went up to Lewis Skweyiya whose office was two doors away on the same floor. I said look, `Please attend to their needs, we are pushing them into political difficulty`. Another lawyer on the same floor was a Unity Movement fellow, and I said `Politically you and I disagree, but on one thing we do agree and that is that we cannot ignore the plight of workers. Can you please take over my office with Lewis Skweyiya and do whatever is to be done, I cannot do this`. Luckily the NIC secretary - Singh was his name.

Before I left I was on my way over to one of our NIC guys; a merchant. But some of the strikers spotted me. They were on their way to my offices. They had walked out on strike and now needed to talk about how to protect themselves. I sent them up to Harold, and went on my way. By that afternoon or the next day we had some 200 food parcels ready to distribute to people to my office.

And I knew I was going to have problems with my landlord, who did not appreciate all these comings and goings. Now this was in March of 1973. Within a week of what was happening, I was the recipient of the first parcel bomb. I didn't die. This is pertinent to your question – was there an office for the NIC. I was the recipient of a parcel bomb. I didn't die. Ten days down the line, the following Saturday I was banished from Durban in the magisterial district of Inanda, I couldn't enter Durban again. Therefore I had no access to my office, therefore no access to Harold, to Vusi, and to the people who matter around me. But my wife took over the office and became the go between.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of August of the same year, all this is happening in April. So within six months of this time she is involved in the worker movement. Meetings here and there, Bolton Hall and all. She is now running my office. This time the state turns on her. Bans her, George Sewpersadh, Chetty one of the Deputy Presidents all on the same day. I remember this so distinctly because it was my son's 9<sup>th</sup> birthday.

But you know the support system that I, you must telephone old man `Doc`, he was always around when I got banned. And after the bomb, when I sneaked into town, he ensured that every meal that I had in Durban was supervised. He would make sure it was delivered and would come and check on me afterwards. Around 1.45 every day. He'd always say that if we cannot carry each other on our backs, those of us who are on other people's backs must get off, we must not be the burden, if we cannot take the burden. If we cannot take the burden of others on our shoulders then we have no right to be the burden on other people's shoulders. He came to Parliament for some function and reminded me of this `Do you remember that?` `we need you`. I said, yeah I remember something like that. He is much older than I am, and he looks around and says `So where are the others from then?`. And he names [NAMES WITHHELD], and [NAME WITHHELD] and [NAME WITHHELD] and others. `And where are the children, where do you think they are?`. He named them all, but you don't have to mention them by name, OK.

IAIN: No, that's fine.

MEWA: And ultimately it is my belief that it is the collected expressions of all our activities together against a common enemy, in the short term, that is far more important than for us to be ideologically combative and dissipate our energies with each other.

IAIN: Yes, but did that really always happen in practice?

MEWA: I think it did. I mean you take a person like Rowley; once a Leninist and then a reformist. He identified himself virtually totally with us at that stage. You had the ideologically pure Rick Turner, the philosopher king or whatever. He could now give expression to his ideas with us. We had the student idealists like Halton Cheadle who could work at a trade union office and know that he is doing political work. Notwithstanding that in the same context we had people like Alec Erwin and others. Johnny Copelyn. Because then we were thinking that they were reactionaries, and they thought the same. But there were good relationships, and it was more complex that some people want to remember now.

IAIN: Now, we have to discuss this. Inside the NIC are people who are there to destroy the organization. Without mentioning names, you must have known about this then?

MEWA: Well, no let's be explicit about this. The Durban Central Branch was chaired by [NAME WITHHELD]. His office bearers were people like [NAME WITHHELD], and [NAME WITHHELD]. Saths Cooper and Strini Moodley had their guys inside the NIC. They belonged to the Black Consciousness Movement but they realized that here in the NIC is a vehicle which they can use to espouse their cause. Dilly Naidoo had some leanings towards them too until 1972: he talked their language but believed in Congress. These guys talked Congress language but believed in the Black Consciousness Movement. In 1972 that Branch became a catalyst for the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement that was launched in Pietermaritzburg by Professor somebody, I forget his name. Now we didn't have any contact with the white community, excepting through Phoenix. Rowley might have been seen by us as a reformist systems guy, but he was no one in the white community. Same with Rick. But they all came in and out of my office. Rick was at work camps at Phoenix. It was a living experience, a lived experience. It was not theoretical. No matter what our differences, but that was the experience that I lived through and that is the experience that they lived through.

There is one incident that I must share with you. Well by 1973 there was a realization that a Congress tradition was becoming established in its modest fashion, Saths Cooper came up to my office asking to borrow my typewriter. I lent it to him and I believe he typed a pamphlet on my typewriter and copies were distributed in the Victoria Street bus rank, calling for people to do X, Y, and Z. I think he was calling for people to go on strike. And under the name of the BCM he got arrested, and taken to Fisher Street or was it Masonic Road? I didn't know he was there. But late that night the security police – led by Lieutenant Pieters as he now was - came to arrest me at Phoenix Settlement with an arresting force of three or four motor cars full of policemen. The night watchman knocked on my window and says he thinks that police are here to arrest me. The whole house is surrounded. So when I opened the door the Lieutenant from the security police says he's arresting me and I must go with them to Masonic Grove. I refused to go because I said I was house arrested and I was not permitted to leave my house after 7 pm. And Pieters just said 'Listen don't be funny, we house arrested you and now you ask me to break the law?' That's very funny too, but I realized I was not on a winning line here, so I said OK.

IAIN: By this time your kids are awake?

MEWA: Well one or two of them are awake but not all because my kids were very small then. And I said to the police I'm coming but I'm going to my neighbours to ask them to come and bedsit my children, because as you've heard my wife says she is coming with me. She didn't end up coming. They kept quiet and didn't say a word. In the meantime my dog Raja was ears up, listening and then watching all this. As I got into my car - a VW with a hatchback -

two security police get in the back too. And then Raja jumps on to the front seat and looks at the two cops on the backseat. The cops told me `We want you to take us to your office and we want to impound your typewriter.` Off we went with Raja. And he just watched growling as the cops were busy in my office. We go to Masonic Grove and I made my statement to say that here is my typewriter, he did borrow it from me, I don't know what he did. The security police took me to an office, and Raja came in and sat next to me. They released me at around three or four o'clock in the morning. I don't have a sense of humor at this part of the morning.

IAIN: What kind of a dog?

MEWA: Alsatian.

IAIN: You also had Steve Biko coming to you?

MEWA: Yes, not once, not twice, as a matter of habit actually and we were very close friends. He could take decisions which I disagreed with and compromise me at a meeting. I could, it is a pity that the tape is not available, but I had a tape of when he came to protest meeting at the Bolton Hall in 1971 when I got re-banned and house arrested this time too. He was on speaker's podium at the meeting. I think it was a nice gesture. Here was a man that I disagreed with but he does not fail to recognize that there is something here which he can feel content with.

IAIN: Now one person who is not around but who was important in other activities was the Chairperson of the Phoenix Settlement Trust - Pat Poovalingam.

MEWA: I don't think that Poovalingam forgave me for what I did. Poovlingam, when he was Chairperson, instructed me to respond to a letter to him. I must reply to this letter which I refused to do and I said I would table it for discussion instead. I don't think he forgave me for that. But the gradual distancing of these people from Phoenix Settlement began in that period as a new set of people began taking the chair. Like Ismail Meer. But ironically whilst that was happening there was another kind of tendency developing as Phoenix Settlement management became more radicalized. We had successfully created the Gandhi Centenary Committee, under the leadership of Pat Poovalingam, Paton and the others. Then slowly we created the Mahatma Gandhi Clinic with its one sub-committee. Then we had the Gandhi work camps which was a different issue altogether. With the emergence of these activities came a re-evaluation of the purpose of the place. And the question as to who should provide leadership was crucial. By then Ismail Meer had become the Grantee; a responsibility given to him by Mrs Gandhi. Mrs Gandhi was advancing in age. I myself was getting more and more



impatient. We had a sewing group going there; we had a crèche going on there, so there were different localities within the Settlement. We introduced the Girls Guide grouping there and we passed on to the Girl Guides the responsibility for X, Y, and Z under the protection of the Girl Guides Movement. They had their own work camps. We had the Gandhi work camp which was doing its thing. We had the farming activities emerging where we employed people. And Phoenix Settlement had become a focus of parliamentary debates. `We know what that banned person is doing there`, that we will get at him one day. As these new developments happened, it came to be that people like Ismail Meer didn't come back after 1985 when Phoenix got destroyed. You won't believe that up until 1996 he didn't attend a single meeting. There was a stage in 1971 when even Fatima Meer was a member of the working committee and she herself didn't come back after being on a university `leave of absence`. Steve Biko was also a member of the Working Committee. Rick Turner was a member of the Working Committee. So there was an active dynamism in that committee to take Phoenix Settlement in a particular direction to be related to the general satisfaction of people in terms of what I later on termed the Gandhian Trinity of *Ahimsa*, *Sarvodaya* and *Satyagraha*. Albeit that Rick Turner had another calling in both being a French Marxist and an agenda that might have lent towards the vision of Biko. So Phoenix could not be a placid institution; organized and retaining within it platitudes about Gandhi and not transforming itself as an instrument. So they had to be a learning in each of us, and also a reconciliation. And recognition. Here was Gandhi's first ashram and we now had to make it relevant, all again. And some said even for the first time. All in all, given his own belief in serving the poorest of the poor, and Gandhi's religious compulsion to see the divinity in each and every individual, we grew together. Now I am not saying that Phoenix Settlement was an ideal institution. I am not saying that Phoenix Settlement was the only institution doing this but in the morass it became an island in the morass and by its very existence challenged the vulgarities of apartheid to which lots and lots and lots of institutions succumbed.

But there were complex emotions for me. I think the first time I realized the agony of being house arrested, banned, bombed and now banished was within all this activity at Phoenix. An agony seized me. A restlessness seized me. I suddenly felt incarcerated, I suddenly felt isolated. So some relatives in India wrote to me to say that there is a dying relative of yours by marriage who wants to see you before she dies. And they made an application to the Minister of Justice at the time - Vorster - to say that this relative wishes to see me. God knows what got into Vorster's head. He allowed me to see her. He gave me permission to leave the magisterial district of Inanda to proceed to Louis Botha Airport and to proceed to India. Now all my family already had their own passports or as children were on my wife's. Now I had a travel document. So I travelled. Yeah, I must report when I leave and I must report when I come back. But they didn't tell me what I can and what I couldn't do in India. They didn't tell me I could and couldn't do in Mauritius or Sri Lanka, the route that I took - Johannesburg, Sri

Lanka, Sri Lanka, Bombay, Bombay, Mauritius, Mauritius, Durban. They didn't tell me that and what I did there is for another discussion.

IAIN: And you went, and came back.

MEWA: Yes I did go and I came back, and I got a heroes' welcome on my return.

IAIN: Why do you think Vorster allowed this?

MEWA: He will go there and never come back.

IAIN: The minute that bastard is on the plane he will never come back, and even if he tries we'll stop him.

MEWA: Well I expected it. People did say this when they said goodbye. I said `No, you are making the biggest mistake of your life!` I was very careful about who came to see me off, because my family was not here. So there will be rumours that Mewa has sent his family out already and now he is leaving and is not coming back.

IAIN: And your mother? Your compatriots?

MEWA: Well my mother came to my home asking me to take her into my confidence. I said listen, I said to her, then you don't know you child – `I will never do that unless I discussed it with my colleagues, with you and other members of my family`. If I were to do that can you imagine what I am saying to my colleagues politically? Can you imagine what a betrayal that would be. But she was not convinced because I was her child albeit 40 odd years of age but I was still a child.

And when I went to India and the offer was made to me to remain in India, and the offer was made to me in consultation with London by the Indian authorities, ranging from Mrs Indira Gandhi who said to me, `You mean you are going back to your banning orders and house arrest?` and I said to her `Madam Prime Minister this is what I have learnt from the life of your father and the life of the father of your nation`. She kept quiet but she sent a person who became later the Prime Minister of India with two of her staff to a social meeting making me the offer again and I said no. And I came back.

INTERVIEW ENDS