

**Mewa Ramgobin with Mr Ronnie Govender interviewed by Iain Edwards,  
Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African  
Parliament, Cape Town, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2003**

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TAPE 1, SIDE 1

RONNIE: What kind of people they are they, and whatever else you can tell me from the historical perspective. [INAUDIBLE]

MEWA: What I am going to do for you, it will make it easier, I have jogging my memory from first time I met him in the 1960's

RONNIE: I was going to come to that, your involvement with him

MEWA: I'll capture all that and then you can deal with it whatever way you want to.

RONNIE: Just try and focus on him and the factual thinking

MEWA: Yes that is what I am doing.

IAIN: Where did you first meet?

MEWA: I first met Griffiths Mxenge, I had not met Victoria at that stage in 1964 when I came to the University of Natal as a student. I was at that stage going out of the University of Natal and engaged in my honours work. As a student he was a normal student as were his contemporaries at the time: people like Judge Lewis Skweyiya, Sydney Dunn, myself and a few others. He was a junior and at the time he came in, Rivonia was also about to happen. So the traumatic time that he came was an indication to him too, in particular, which we realised that even though he was a junior student, that things were happening around him but naturally he was drawn towards us because we comprised the commerce component of the ANC, the component on the campus at Natal University. He became dynamically involved and lived at Alan Taylor Residence and he became involved to the extent that as early as 1966 he was arrested for the first time. To the best of my knowledge. We didn't know why he was arrested but he was convicted in 1967. It was after his conviction that we realised that it was because of his activities with the ANC. But when he was released in 1969, he had not completed his studies, he came towards us and those of us who were then in businesses and professions, and we received him. He got articulated to a firm of attorneys called Sewpersad and Company and this firm of attorneys: himself he was a very gracious human being and a very good human being and with deep leanings towards the Congress movement. And to the best of my recollection, in early 1971 or late 1970, Rowley Arenstein also got articulated clerks too. Now here was a strange situation. There became a place where things could be discussed: people like us met with them there politically and when the Campaign for Clemency was

established in 1971, Louis Skweyiya was one of the members of the Committee for Clemency. Griffiths was not in it. Not because he didn't want to be in it, but because I think having just come out of jail it was difficult for him to adjust himself again in this kind of political activity. Because the Committee of Clemency was for the release of all political prisoners, the return of exiles, and the unbanning of banned people and organisations. Louis Skweyiya was with us, a very close associate of Mxenge, and when it was announced that the Natal Indian Congress was going to be resuscitated I distinctly remember Griffiths coming up to my office and asking what then happens to the ANC? And in fairness to him at the time, we did explain to him, that the NIC was an ally of the ANC. The NIC was never banned, it was not outlawed, it's leadership was intact, whereas the ANC was outlawed and banned, and it could not exist. We explained it was because so many of their leaders were in jail and also banned and house-arrested. And he was convinced that tactically we were correct to revive the NIC. As a result of which, when a mandate was given to the Committee for the revival of the NIC - at some time in June of 1971 -, Griffiths with Victoria, and a whole range of other people from townships were also present at the resuscitation of the NIC. And it's a resuscitation of the Congress, the tradition and the Freedom Charter politics.

But simultaneously what happened is this. When he was released from jail in 1969, the South African Students Organisation was also born in 1969, 68/69. So we had a situation that while SASO was a student organisation it was not rooted in the community, but only on campus. And Natal University was the main catalyst for SASO. Griffiths was there in the midst of it all. In March of 1971 SASO had advertised a meeting to observe the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Sharpeville. It was at the Allan Taylor Residence. Griffiths was in the audience. I was the speaker with AWG Champion and the [INAUDIBLE] from the Transkei and Dr [INAUDIBLE] from Butterworth in the Transkei. This meeting was scheduled to be held at a particular time, whilst I was in Cape Town. The significance of why I am saying this about myself at that meeting is that whilst I was not consulted by the organisers of the meeting: whether I was willing to speak on that platform or not, nonetheless it was advertised as so. So when I got back from Cape Town to Durban I was on my rounds for the `Campaign for Clemency`. I was told this by Steve Biko and the others: `You are scheduled to speak at this meeting on the Saturday afternoon.` The meeting was held on the Sunday morning. I tried to seek Griffiths out at that stage. I couldn't meet him but because I wanted to consult people from the ANC: whether I should or shouldn't. It was my first exposure to the community on a SASO platform. However I took the decision that I would go there and the kind of humiliation that Mr Champion got at the hands of one indiscreet student and my intervention there, apologising to Mr Champion about this kind of indiscretion. That they are youthful, and I do not think they understand both the history of our struggle, nor the cultural bearings of our people. And Griffiths was in the audience at that stage. And after the meeting he came up to me to say congratulation: that as an African National Congress cadre you have demonstrated today how African National Congress cadres ought to be behaving. Now this is the Griffiths who had the sense and a tremendous humility to acknowledge rights and wrongs. In that same period a family's social informal relationship also grew. I was living at Phoenix Settlement at this stage. Griffiths had very small children - very, very young children. I don't think he had all three of them. I was by then re-banned, and house arrested. But in order to show solidarity and a sense of responsibility I guess for all of us - Griffiths did not hesitate to break the rules - when in fact of course by coming to me he was breaking the rules that I had to observe. But he came along. One fascinating experience: perhaps it might amuse lots of people. Griffiths was a good eater. He liked food very much. Not that I don't, I do too. But

to come to a house in which only vegetables are cooked at Phoenix Settlement with a bucket full of Kentucky Chicken: it was a bit odd. So he had to eat his Kentucky Chicken in the car because we didn't have meat at Phoenix in the house. But he didn't hesitate to do that later in life in the 70's when I moved off. He did exactly that. In that period, which was about the most gruesome, vicious and deepest depressive period from the mid-60's on until the 1980's. Sometime around 1971/72 something happened. . I don't know what but he came to my office to ask whether I could arrange for him to be articulated to a new firm of attorneys. And so it was around 1972 or 1973 that Griffiths was articulated to George Sewersadth. Because of the distance between ourselves in Durban and George in Verulam I said to George that with Griffiths with you will be a tremendous solidification for the relationship between the President of the NIC and the leading cadres at the time who were outside in South Africa - of the ANC. George gave him his articles.

Then in 1973 something very traumatic happened. I received a parcel bomb which exploded in my office sometime in March in 1973. When it was known that this parcel bomb had exploded, it was Griffiths who came up, leaving his office, to see whether I was okay, and only to find Jacquie Arensteen, M.D. Naidoo, Saths Cooper: all banned people gathered in the office of another banned person. That was me. And Griffiths walked into this crowd of banned people, and a funny moment happened. I don't know what my face looked like because I had my children around me. Then Griffiths walked in with a huge grin, because he knew that I was not dead. By then he had known that my children were safe. His laughter was thunderous and he could laugh in one street and you could hear him in another street. And when he arrived there he found the security police there: five, six banned people together in one venue with the Security Police: he laughed and he shouted - `What the hell is happening here, is this a conference of banned people?' Griffiths! And said, before the cops could take all these things away, `Let's pick the remains up and send it for our own analysis.` At that stage the Security Police had got to know what had happened and I think they gave him marching orders: `Will you please leave` and thereafter you had all these banned people piling out one after the other, only to find out later that these banned people were being addressed by Griffiths! But in another office. Louis Skweyiya's office was two doors away from mine and I think they were being interviewed by a person called Naidoo who was then working for the *Rand Daily Mail*. Now these are little episodes in the life, or I can say in my life

IAIN : [INAUDIBLE]

MEWA: At this stage, Griffiths - the only family members that I had met around this time - he would come with his children to Phoenix Settlement. I don't remember Victoria at Phoenix Settlement. But I do remember Victoria after I left Phoenix Settlement and went to Verulam. I had seen Victoria at his offices. [INDISTINCT] In 1973/74 these things happened. But there was one distinct episode where Griffiths brought his younger brother called Mbata to meet with me in a different capacity because Mbata had visited me at Phoenix, as a student in those days with tremendous promise. And it will not be an exaggeration to say that Griffiths has a lot of respect for people who were struggling to be educated because by then that concept of education in a situation like South Africa, where Bantu education had prevailed for over a generation was important. Whilst Griffiths could be assertive and in many ways he was assertive in his personality. He was biggish in size, he had a loud voice. He had the authority of the ANC with him, because he belonged to the underground movement. He had known that before he arrived on the political scene in Natal, that the likes of me had engaged in underground activities for the ANC by taking people away from South Africa into

exile. Word had got back and people like Griffiths knew that we constituted part of the underground he related to. People like M D Naidoo and Rowley Arenstein were also part of the ANC underground, along with myself. But it was very difficult to keep Griffiths quiet, politically or otherwise. He had a personal issue. I think his articles would have taken him to qualify for him to appear in court as a candidate attorney. One of the people he consulted was me when he asked me what should he do, because of his conviction, it did not allow him to practice as a lawyer or to appear in court. To appear in court you had to be a candidate attorney and articulated. And he asked me whether he should write to Lennox Sebe. Griffiths was from the Ciskei. To ask Lennox Sebe to make representations on his behalf

IAIN: So asking a Bantustan leader to support his application to be admitted as an attorney, because he had political offence.

MEWA: Because he had a political offence. I didn't see anything wrong with it. In those circumstances I knew that, and I said this to him, that Lennox Sebe and his partners in the Ciskei were the custodians of that kind of power which related to the delivery of homes and management of education, the building of schools, the building of poor houses, the control over police stations. They were all subject to that. And I said to him: 'I don't think people like Rowley Arenstein and others will object to it. By then M D Naidoo was released - in the 1972 period. I don't know if he did this but he did ask me for my opinion and that's the kind of consultative person that he was. That he will very rarely, if at all, work alone. So that happened. Then he died. He was assassinated. What you don't know is that he was killed like an animal in 1981. People like Bulalani Ngcuka and company was an articulated clerk for him for a while. I think Bulalani himself was released from jail by then but after his release he went to Griffiths, or am I losing my bearings here. Was he with Griffiths after his release? [INDISTINCT] But it was Bulelani who came up to my office the following morning after his body was discovered with a group of people to [INDISTINCT]. I couldn't go to Durban because I was house arrested and banished to the magisterial district of Verulam. But somehow or the other because of Griffith's life: and here it is impossible for me to talk about Griffiths without talking about myself. And I don't like doing that and it is Griffiths who we should be talking about, and we organised the grave site in King Williams Town from here. And whether it was the taking down of people from Cape Town by bus or by trains or whether it was the mobilisation of the sources in King Williams Town. In 1981 it was not easy for issues of this nature to take place without difficulties on the one hand. On the other hand, the likes of Griffiths and ourselves together succeeded in making funerals a point for mass mobilisation. The political speeches were made with impunity. I think his funeral was one too. There was some controversy around his funeral as to who could speak there or who could not speak there. I don't know if I want to enter into that one because others must comment.

But between 1976 and 1981 in that period, Griffiths was introduced to the radical left in the white community. The radical left of the white community at that stage in the Durban grouping were people like the late Dr Rick Turner, the current labour expert and a whole range of other people. But this is the irony and yet the dynamics of our working relationship. But between 1971 and that period we did several things together. Griffiths has become an integral part of what was at that stage being spearheaded by the NIC. One of the things that was spearheaded by the NIC was the establishment of the Labour Department at Bolton Hall: a structure for the mobilisation.

We call it the Education Unit. I don't remember the exact name it was called, the Labour Education something. Now myself as a bank person with resources were available because we were around and the people involved were the people like Rick Turner, Laurence Schlemmer, Griffiths, Lewis Skweyiya, and I.

IAIN: And FOSATU?

MEWA: The Worker Benefit Fund. Now this became the catalyst in 1971 for the re-emergence of the trade union movement. I suggest that people like Harriet Bolton record this. Because in as much as I was there lurking in my office, the link between that movement which was my wife at the time and Rick Turner who was my colleague at Phoenix Settlement and one chap who was in my employ: Harold. In my office primarily employed to mobilise. And Griffiths. Now that was not smooth sailing. It was not smooth sailing to the extent that he became the first victim because in as much as we wanted to work with him, he couldn't because of the pressures on him. But it must not be forgotten that whilst we were doing that with him we were in no way trying to dismember or destroy Chief Gatsha Buthelezi. No way. It was simultaneously the likes of me where we established the Gandhi work camps in 1970 or 1971. We invited Chief Gatsha Buthelezi to officially open the Gandhi work camp at Phoenix Settlement. So it was a multi-pronged attack on system politics. At that stage, Bunny was a very good person and a very good front, but a very legitimate person to be associated with the trade union movement. So in 1973 when Durban and Pinetown burst out into strikes: the strikes began basically at Coronation Brick and Tile. Yes there was a tremendous amount of spontaneity but one cannot disregard the role played by people like Griffiths in the townships. He could not be seen on the factory floor but one cannot ignore the roles played by them. You cannot ignore the role played by people like [NAME INDISTINCT] who was very close to Griffiths, and who was not a lawyer at that stage. And the social base constituted by people who were not in the ANC but their hearts were there. Griffiths was one such person who facilitated that process. Griffiths did not hesitate to walk up with us to go to merchants to get resources for the families of workers who were on strike. Just as Enver Motala did not hesitate to work with Griffiths after I had walked out of my office, took over my office and Griffiths made that his base for at least three weeks or two weeks. I think it was because of that, I like to believe that actually, I think it was because of that that stage: Griffiths whilst he did not have an organisational structure visible to work with he did not hesitate to be the symbol or the carrier of the ANC message wherever he was. Whether he worked with us in the Clemency Committee, the Release Mandela Committee which came to the fore thereafter or NIC and later, just before the UDF was launched. But what I wanted to say is that Griffiths's office subsequently became the headquarters of the Release Mandela Committee. There was a debate whether it should be a Release Mandela Committee or a Release Mandela Campaign but it was in his office, somewhere in Victoria Street. Just a couple of months before he died others would be able to verify the exact time and date. I was still banned and house arrested at that time but the documents of that are provided by my office. You'll have them, somewhere.

INTERVIEW ENDS