Interview with VIC ZAZERAJ

Key:

SO: = Sue Onslow (interviewer)
VZ: = Vic Zazeraj (respondent)

SO: This is Dr. Sue Onslow talking to Mr. Vic Zazeraj at TransAfrica House in Johannesburg on the 15th of April 2013. Vic, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by saying, please, how did you come to join the Department of Foreign Affairs in South Africa?

VZ: Much to the despair of my parents I'm afraid. My father was a Polish airman stationed in the UK during the Second World War. My mother was English, and after the War my parents immigrated to Cape Town. I did not become an engineer or a lawyer, or a doctor as my parents would have preferred. I studied political science and political history and philosophy. I was doing post-graduate studies at the University of Cape Town when I got married and then I had to find a real job.

I applied at the Department of Foreign Affairs to undergo diplomatic cadet training, and to see if I could make a career in the Foreign Service. I joined the Foreign Service in 1974 in Pretoria at a time when John Vorster was still the prime minister. Dr. Hilgard Muller was the Minister of Foreign Affairs and it was a particularly crucial time in the history of southern Africa. The coup d'état had occurred in Lisbon in April of that year. It heralded the withdrawal of Portuguese interest from Mozambique and Angola. Suddenly the strategic equation in southern Africa was fundamentally altered.

So it was a very interesting time to join the Department of Foreign Affairs. What fascinated me at the time was that I was of a generation of young South Africans who believed that the country had a future: that we could find a way out of the political dead-end we were in at the time. It took another 20 years, from 1974 to 1994, but the people who were joining the foreign service at the time and going into politics at the time were the same generation as Roelf Meyer, Leon Wessels and others. We were all of the same generation, all believing that there was a way out: that the two fundamental forces in this part of the world which were Afrikaner nationalism on the one hand, and African nationalism on the other; were not necessarily destined to be permanently at loggerheads; that there was a way to find accommodation and find a future for South Africa.

The one who was articulating that view and inspiring most of us at the time was Pik Botha himself, who had been a Foreign Service officer for a long time. He had gone into politics and in his first maiden speech in Parliament had made the statement that South Africa should associate itself with the Universal Declaration of Human rights. He said a number of other things which inspired my generation to become involved in making some kind of contribution to South Africa's future. So that's how I landed up as a young cadet in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

SO: Was the Department of Foreign Affairs, at that particular time, a natural recruiting point as far as the South African public service was concerned for English speaking South Africans? I'm just wondering if there was a particular English-speaking cohort among the wider white population that was attracted to it because it was the outward looking of all the civil service departments.

VZ: That's true; in fact the two departments in the civil service that attracted a larger number of English speaking South Africans were the Department of Defence - particularly the Navy and the Air force - and the Department of Foreign Affairs, that's right; whereas many departments were almost exclusively Afrikaans. Those two were more or less a 50/50 which was a little unusual. So your question is spot on.

SO: Also you identified very much a new generation coming through, joining the DFA at that particular point, with Pik Botha as very much your guiding light in terms of looking for a way out, as you emphasize, of the dead-end policies of Apartheid. At that particular time could the National Party be divided into the Verlichte and the Verkrampte -?

VZ: Yes.

SO: - sections? Or was it in fact a more complicated, a more complex political spectrum within the National Party?

VZ: The party had already split in 1968 or '69 over the sports policy. You remember the question of Basil D'Oliveira coming to play cricket in South Africa and the party had split over the question of mixed-race sports. The reconstituted National Party; in Afrikaans, the Herstigte Nasionale Party was formed, I think, round about 1969. The biggest preoccupation of the governing National Party at the time was not to allow that split to grow; in other words, to contain that split and it was at that point that Pik Botha decided to leave the relative security of the public service and go into a very uncertain future in politics. They gave him a constituency to stand in, the Wonderboom seat, which was held by one of those right wing leaders who had broken away.

Many people at the time thought he was simply being thrown to the sharks. There was no way he could beat an established figure like the sitting MP, but he did. He was very consistent in his message. He was very frank; he addressed meetings all over the constituency. He was very active, and he won that election against the odds. That was very inspiring for a younger generation of South Africans wondering whether there was a role for people like us going into government service, into public service. That was a very inspiring development for all of us.

So to answer your question: the party split again some years later when the Conservative party of Andries Treurnicht was formed. The National Party at the time saw the biggest political threat to its continued control of government coming from the right. The African National Congress was not regarded as a political or military threat at that stage. Liberation struggle or no liberation struggle, they were not regarded as something that could defeat the State apparatus.

SO: So when did you join Pik Botha's office as his particular political adviser/assistant.

VZ: In 1981. I had been abroad. After my cadet training I was transferred to Malawi for a couple of years, and from there I was posted to Finland and spent three years in Helsinki. I came back in 1980 and at the time Pik Botha was looking for a new private assistant. So I was appointed at that time, in 1981.

SO: That was after the transition of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe to independence -?

VZ: Yes.

SO: - leaving South Africa and south West Africa as very much the embattled southern part of the continent.

VZ: Yes.

SO: This is also the era in which Apartheid South Africa was increasingly criticised in the Commonwealth and there were growing demands for economic sanctions, in addition to the military sanctions against South Africa. Did you hold any particular view? Did your colleagues within DFA have a particular view, at this time, of the role, or the value, indeed the relative unimportance of the Commonwealth as far as South Africa was concerned?

VZ: The Commonwealth was always regarded as important. South Africa had left the Commonwealth in 1961 to become a republic. But the fact that the Commonwealth continued to exist, continued to play a role and exert, particularly in Africa, a very strong footprint, was an obvious consideration. Its impact was never underestimated. The difficulty for Britain, and I think we all understood this in the Department of Foreign Affairs, was that they could not sacrifice relations with the rest of Africa or the developing world in favour of supporting Apartheid South Africa.

The values of the Commonwealth were simply not compatible with what was going on in this country. The dilemma that we had at the time was that here you had the Commonwealth which incorporated no end of military dictatorships, one party States, States where no black person had any rights whatsoever. In fact, I remember a Nigerian diplomat telling me at the UN that oddly enough the only country in Africa where a black man could take his own government to court and win was

Apartheid South Africa. You couldn't try that in Zambia or Tanzania or Kenya, or Nigeria or anywhere else.

So we had a very strange set of circumstances where the dilemma was that it wasn't the fact that black people were denied their political rights in South Africa. The question was who was denying them their rights? If they were denied those rights by a black government, that was okay. So if you were denied the right to vote in Uganda or in Cameroon or somewhere else, that was acceptable. If it was a white government denying those rights, that was not acceptable.

SO: So there was a difference between racial justice and absolute justice?

VZ: This became a tricky issue in South Africa. It was something we grappled with. We also understood that this was a very complex issue for the Commonwealth and that the Commonwealth was trying to play a useful and constructive role.

SO: When you say "we", are you talking about the junior ranks of the DFA?

VZ: Yes. We're also talking about the Minister's office in the Department of Foreign Affairs where these issues were discussed because the message coming to us from the Commonwealth was that we were running out of time. South Africa had to start demonstrating positive steps towards some kind of conclusive, some kind of acceptable solution in the country.

The National Party government was saying; how do we do this? How do we persuade our constituency that the question of developing a road map towards majority rule will mean that we will find acceptance in the Commonwealth? But we will look like Zambia, or our country will look like Nigeria. Now what is the choice? Do you want be a member of the Commonwealth and look like Zambia where people are starving and there's nothing in the shops? There's a complete economic meltdown. There's no free press, no political freedom, there's no nothing. It's a one party State, but it is acceptable to the Commonwealth. Is that what you want? That'll give you acceptance in the Commonwealth, but imagine what our country will look like.

Now that became a real political debate within the Department of Foreign Affairs and also within the Foreign Affairs Committee of Parliament at the time. These were issues they were talking to us about. How do we bridge this gap? So the dilemma was how do we tell our people, the people who vote for the National Party, that we are now embarking on a path that is going to lead to something looking like Uganda under Idi Amin or Tanzania under Julius Nyerere, but that will give us international acceptance. There's no way the white electorate of this country would ever accept that.

That debate was overtaken by events because the coup in Portugal and the withdrawal of the Portuguese military from this part of the world, from Angola and Mozambique, and the independence of Zimbabwe, had

changed the strategic security situation. The debate then became a survival question. It became a question of military survival and an existential issue. So the political debate was put to one side and the issue of the day became; we have to fight our way out of this and we need to do so from a position of strength. And when we've resolved this issue we can then come back to solving the political problem. So that was the thinking.

SO: I'm interested with your presentation of this. I totally take your point about the existential crisis following on from the isolation of South Africa after Pretoria's intervention in Angola in 1975 to the extent to which you were traduced in the United Nations, and yet the discussion in the Organisation of African States was very much an evenly balanced one in seeking South Africa's gradual withdrawal, rather than an immediate withdrawal. But by the beginning of the 1980s this was the era of the cautious reform which leading to the creation of the tri-cameral parliament in 1983.

Even though there was the renewed emphasis on the need for defence, and a 'total national strategy' to deal with 'total national onslaught', with the focus of discussion and debate increasingly within the State Security Council, still there were early signs of reform. This then placed the emphasis on South African foreign policy to buy time for reform. This is very much Pik Botha's line, and he has presented it as such to me.

VZ: Yes, correct.

SO: So South Africa was still trying to reach out to the international community to get validation of the tri-cameral parliament?

VZ: Yes, it goes back to the days of John Vorster when he was still prime minister. John Vorster talked about a new outward policy. The National Party had traditionally been very inward looking and the outward policy was saying that South Africa's access to the world was through Africa. We are part of Africa and we have to reach out to our African neighbours. Then he made the unfortunate statement that he didn't think that his generation would be able to resolve the issue.

But he appointed - and this was the first practical step in South Africa's reform process - he appointed a Stellenbosch professor by the name of Erika Theron to head what became known as the Theron Commission essentially on the future of the coloured people, because you could argue, at least at high theoretical level, that the separate development policy - as apartheid was then called - was justified on the grounds of language, culture and various other things; that each ethnic group in this country should have the freedom to govern itself in its own territory, according to its own rules, traditions, values, culture, and language and so forth. In that separate development logic, there was no place for the coloured people. You couldn't locate them anywhere; they were not a separate ethic group.

So how do we deal with this? Erika Theron, who was a sociologist from the University of Stellenbosch, authored the Theron Report which was

very influential. And it set a number of thinkers on the path to developing some kind of way of resolving South Africa's constitutional impasse. It went on for a number of years; there were so many committees in Parliament, committees of academics. Ultimately we landed up with a tri-cameral parliament which could only be the product of a committee.

SO: Yes, an animal that didn't make sense!

VZ: No rational individual would design it that way; so if you wanted to design a donkey, get a committee to do it... and this is pretty much what happened, and then a referendum was held. So you're absolutely right in the sense of the thinking that "We must change" was there, and there were endless committees and reports. We can go back and look at all those documents today. Some of them are rather amusing to read by today's standards. Some of them would make you want to cringe, but that was the language that was used in the day.

They eventually came up with this compromise proposal. Now the interesting thing about this was that in the referendum campaign that followed in 1983 the most popular politician at the time, around this country, was Pik Botha himself. I went with him to dozens of these political meetings. We would be one night in Parow, the night after in East London and then we would be in Polokwane, and then in Kimberly and it was just one after the other.

The reason I was travelling with him (I was a civil servant, not a member of any political party) was that while he was doing all the speechifying, urging people to vote in favour of this tri-cameral system, he was also still the Foreign Minister. There were still incoming cables and urgent issues coming in all the time. We were sitting in hotel rooms and in airport lounges dealing with these matters. He was filling halls all over the country. People were concerned about the future. We were in rural towns sometimes, in the town hall, or the school hall, great big microphones and outside there would be loud speakers so people standing outside could stand there and listen to him arguing the case for change.

He was very, very up front, if you go back and look at those speeches; he was saying that this tri-cameral parliament system cannot work. It was an unworkable situation. The black people of this country are a majority, but are excluded from its provisions. So they are never going to find that acceptable, but it has the one virtue that it breaks the current logjam: for the first time people of colour will be in government. It's very imperfect, it's not going to last very long, but at least we take one step. It may be a baby step, it may be entirely inadequate and I believe it is inadequate. It's not going to survive very long at all, but we have to take this step, so let's vote in favour of it.

The opposition, particularly up in the northern Transvaal and places like that, were saying, "But you are leading us into the abyss! We don't know where we're going. You're leading us into the dark forest here and there's no indication of where this will take us." Pik's response was, "Well, sometimes you have to take a leap of faith. What's the alternative? If you turn back it's just as long that way."

SO: Vic you've identified Pik Botha as very much a one-man force for change in South Africa at this particular time. Not quite a prophet crying in the wilderness, but at the vanguard of change within the National Party. Was he also arguing for the release, privately, of Nelson Mandela at this particular point in the early 1980s, that you recall?

VZ: It started in late 1984 because that's when the new constitution was adopted and implemented. So PW Botha went from being Prime Minster to Executive President. The tri-cameral parliament was then instituted and so down in Parliament you can all these rearrangements; the buildings, Chambers of Parliament, offices and so forth. All the parliamentary procedures being rewritten because it meant that every budget vote had to go through three chambers and it became a really complicated issue.

Pik was looking at this with growing concern. He was saying to us, "If we didn't think this was going to work before the referendum, I'll tell you now, looking at it now, this is going to be very problematic." But also bear in mind that at that time Pik was also dealing with the leaders of the TBVC States: Transkei, Boputhatswana, Venda and Ciskei. He was listening very carefully to what they were telling him. It was also at that stage that we concluded negotiations with Mozambique that led to the Nkomati Accord. So he was listening very carefully to President Samora Machel, to Chissano who was the Foreign Minister; to Veira and Jacinto Veloso. He was being very methodical about taking soundings and what he was hearing was not encouraging.

There was outright, unequivocal rejection of this constitutional arrangement. Pik was saying that to PW Botha and everybody else in the cabinet. He was the lone voice at the time. There was no other cabinet minister who shared his views.

SO: I was about to ask you this.

VZ: Yes, there was no other minister in the cabinet who was making this case and saying to his cabinet colleagues, "Look, you know, our African brothers, and neighbours in the TBVC countries and the frontline States, reject this outright. We know that the people within the country are not going to accept this." And this is what happened. No sooner had the new tri-cameral constitution been implemented than the internal unrest accelerated. It blossomed; there were bombs going off all over the place; in supermarkets and everywhere. We were heading for a very, very ugly set of circumstances.

Now some would have argued that we could muddle through for the next 20 or 30 years. The ANC as a military force was never going to defeat the South African security forces. We could muddle through a bit like Zimbabwe has muddled through and other countries have muddled through. But that was not the kind of future that any of us wanted. So towards the end of 1984, beginning 1985, it was beginning to become clearer to folks that in order to break this logjam we needed to do something dramatic. We needed to take the initiative back into our own hands and do the right thing, whatever that was. And not be scared of the future, you know, embrace it, deal with it. That was when the issue of Nelson Mandela's release began to play on Pik's mind.

SO: Vic I could ask you now, please, in your view what role did Britain and what role did the Commonwealth play in helping South Africa do the right thing in this early part of the 1980s? I know that Pik came to Britain in December of 1983. Did you come with him?

VZ: No.

SO: Okay. PW Botha came and met Mrs. Thatcher at Chequers in June of 1984. Did you accompany them on that particular trip?

VZ: Yes, I did.

SO: What's your recollection of that visit?

VZ: I can remember Pik having a great deal of respect for Peter Carrington and the way that he had conducted the Lancaster House talks. The outcome of the Zimbabwe election took the South African government a little by surprise.

SO: Very much by surprise.

VZ: They thought that Bishop Muzorewa would do a lot better than he did. They miscalculated, and interestingly enough Britain's, well certainly the Foreign Office's prediction of the outcome was far more accurate than ours, which puzzled the South African Foreign Minster significantly. He turned to his advisors and said, "How come our British colleagues had a better idea of what the outcome was going to be than we did? Where did we miscalculate?" Where there was a fundamental weakness in South African thinking at the time was that it was based on ethnic identity; the idea that the Matabele would all vote for Joshua Nkomo and the Shona for Mugabe, etc., and the majority would vote for Muzorewa. And if you worked it out solely in those categories Muzorewa would have done better.

SO: Yes.

VZ: But the British analysis was far more sophisticated than ours and we made the mistake of saying - Pik himself did this, he admitted it later - in the meeting with Lord Carrington, "But we are their neighbours, we know them better than you do. You live five thousand miles away. You know, we share a border with them. We know Zimbabwe [laughter]." Turned out that it was completely wrong and the Foreign Office was more accurate.

SO: But by 1984 of course Carrington was no longer Foreign Secretary; it was Geoffrey Howe. When PW Botha came to London after his trip round Europe, there was a deliberate decision not to welcome him to Number 10, Downing Street, because of that massive demonstration along Whitehall and in Trafalgar Square. Do you remember the tone of the discussions between Thatcher and PW Botha, or Geoffrey Howe's relationship with Pik at that particular time?

VZ: I don't think that it was easy for someone like Sir Geoffrey Howe to communicate with someone like Pik Botha. I think it was far easier for Malcolm Rifkind or Douglas Hurd frankly.

SO: Why do you think that is?

VZ: I think it was his personality and Malcolm Rifkind probably had a far better grasp of southern Africa than Geoffrey Howe. Douglas Hurd was a different personality, I can't really give you a sensible answer, I can just tell you my observation was that Pik could relate and talk to Peter Carrington, he respected him, and the others as well.

In that particular visit in 1984 the new tri-cameral parliament had already come into effect. The South African government was seen to be making tentative steps and trying to grasp for some kind of way out and Mrs Thatcher and her government appeared to want to be helpful rather than simply condemning and adopting strident views that were not constructive. Mrs Thatcher was keen to listen to PW and listened very carefully to what he had to say and what his view was. Listen to the dilemmas that the South African government faced in Namibia and in the region, and domestically. And why the South African government could not simply accede to demands of the ANC or the OAU, or the UN because the consequences for us were far too serious.

As I mentioned earlier, it's one thing to say, "Well, if you take all these steps you will be readmitted to the UN and you will be readmitted to the Commonwealth and this, that and the other. But then what kind of country will you be? Look who else is admitted to the UN. Do you want to look like that?" So that was part of the dilemma.

The question of Mandela and his release was raised at that meeting. I think it might be fair to say that it was there that the idea really started germinating in Pik's mind that someone needed to grasp the nettle now and find a way to get Mandela released. This could be choreographed in a way that would not necessarily bring about PW's fear of a complete meltdown in the country.

He started opening this discussion and he was met with initial disbelief, completely off the screen at the time. But the more he argued in favour of it the more convinced he became that it had to happen, and then he made this public statement in February 1986, on his willingness to serve under a Mandela presidency. He'd already been talking about it for a while and PW felt himself forced to repudiate Pik in Parliament. Then Pik very nearly resigned, but the balance of power in the cabinet was already beginning to shift at the time. Younger ministers were coming into the cabinet who supported him, people like Barend du Plessis and others. So Pik had some sort of modest support growing for him.

As the debate continued PW Botha eventually agreed to release Mandela on certain conditions, such as that Mandela would renounce violence as a means to political ends. Pik Botha argued that Mandela could never accept that. You either release the man, or you don't release him. If you want to release him and then enter into negotiations with a parolee, that is not going to work. So we have to find a way to release him unconditionally and this became a big debate within the cabinet.

SO: Vic, if you could just backtrack slightly please to talk about the Eminent Persons Group's tour of early 1986. This was decided at the Nassau Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in October of 1985; and

Mrs Thatcher wrote to P.W. Botha immediately afterwards, arguing or rather soliciting his support to admit this particular Eminent Persons' Group. I know from talking to Pik Botha that the initial reaction within the South African government was remarkably hostile; that they thought that perhaps the EPG would be lobbying, or soliciting internal support; that there was absolutely no need for this Eminent Persons' tour. Were you aware of Pik's views on this particular point about whether they should be admitted?

VZ: Yes. It's quite true that the initial response among PW Botha, FW De Klerk, Chris Heunis, the leaders of the National Party in the cabinet at the time, would have been uniformly negative. They did not feel that the Commonwealth had a constructive role to play in solving what was essentially a domestic South African problem. Pik argued the opposite; that the Commonwealth in fact did have a very constructive role to play. There were very, very strident voices within the Commonwealth demanding much tougher action against South Africa. He, Botha, the Foreign Minister saw no reason why we should not invite these people; why we should not embrace them, and ask them to come and look at our situation. Understand our difficulty; understand the consequences of some of things demanded of us, and if they felt they could play a constructive role, by all means do so. It was very well understood by Pik Botha at the time, that Margaret Thatcher was doing her best to contain these very strident voices, some of them demanding that the Commonwealth take unreasonable steps, or very tough steps, maybe even reckless steps against South Africa. This was an attempt on the part of Mrs Thatcher to help, not to hinder South Africa's progress. So it took a while for Pik to convince his colleagues in the cabinet that it would be a strategic error to turn down the EPG visit. It would be completely the wrong thing to do.

SO: Was there discussion within the Department for Foreign Affairs about how appropriate this EPG visit was -?

VZ: No, the partner for -.

SO: - or was Pik's leadership of the Department so authoritative that this was just not up for discussion.

VZ: But it was also not up for debate in the sense that nobody disputed it. I mean, those of us who were involved in day-to-day management of foreign relations saw no problem with this at all. Whereas others in the more isolationist camp and working in government departments or political environments that were not really associated with the outside world didn't see that the Commonwealth had any role to play here at all. "We just left the Commonwealth the other day, you know why? We don't want them to come and tell us how to run our affairs." So it was very difficult to get them to understand that this was the Commonwealth, and Britain in particular, reaching out to South Africa and saying, "Look, we're here to help." We had to try and convince our colleagues from other departments that this was not a hostile act, it was the exact opposite. So in Foreign Affairs there was no debate about the value of it.

SO: Was this very much South African departments operating then in their individual silos?

VZ: Yes.

SO: You talk about Pik arguing in cabinet where Brand Fourie was also arguing as Secretary for Foreign Affairs with his particular bureaucratic colleagues in home affairs, in defence etc. I'm just wondering the extent of which there might have been a concerted campaign by DFA to try to persuade other departments, or am I painting an entirely false scenario here?

VZ: No, not all. What would have happened in those days is that the Department of Foreign Affairs would have written a cabinet memorandum that would go to the cabinet subcommittee on international relations. It would then go to the cabinet itself, possibly to the State Security Council, although it wasn't a security issue as such. Then Pik Botha was also arguing in his own constituency, at that stage it was here in Johannesburg, and to any audience that he could speak to - arguing for us to open up to the world and to allow the Eminent Persons' Group, and they truly were eminent persons, to come and do what they had to do. He tried to allay suspicions that these were people coming to tell us how to run our affairs. They were not coming to interfere in South Africa's affairs. All these allegations made against the EPG were ill informed, or misinformed. They were coming to have a friendly conversation and it would give us an opportunity as South Africans to explain to them what our problems were. So Pik used every platform he had.

SO: **Did you have briefings of particular journalists within the press?**

VZ: Yes, he did. He did, he had lots of off the record briefings with Ken Owen who was the editor of the Sunday Times, with Alf Ries who was the political editor of Die Burger, Tim du Plessis was the political editor of Beeld/ Rapport, Johan Pretorius was the political editor of SATV. They were part of the parliamentary press corps, and he was one of the few ministers who was always open to them. They'd come and have a quick cup of tea with him in parliament and he'd give them off the cuff briefings just to orientate them. Very often he couldn't give them on record briefings because he was in violation of his own party policy. So the report would read; "a senior political figure told Beeld today" and everybody knew who that senior political figure was. This was part of the guerrilla tactics going on at the time within the National Party.

SO: Pik Botha has said also that the Eminent Persons Group when they arrived were very well aware of how he'd been roasted in Parliament by PW Botha, at De Klerk's and Chris Heunis' instigation, because of his 'black president in my life-time' remark.

VZ: Yes, correct.

SO: - and the leaders of the EPG were therefore particularly favourably disposed to Pik on this particular score. What were your observations of Pik's relationship with General Obasanjo, the co-chairman of the group and the other leading members? There were of course seven in all, with Malcolm Fraser as the other co-chair?

VZ: The warmest part of that conversation was with General Obasanjo. It was as if they were the two fellow Africans who understood each other: the only Africans in the room. The others weren't and could not have the same level of mutual understanding. One was an African Nationalist, the other was an

Afrikaner Nationalist, and Afrikaners are Africans too. They both came from countries that were extremely difficult to govern. Obasanjo had been a military ruler, he understood the dynamics of power, managing power in Africa in a way that you could not expect someone like Malcolm Fraser to understand in 50 lifetimes. Fraser was dour, uninspiring, had nothing serious to contribute, nothing constructive. He was trying to quit smoking in those days. Back then we could actually smoke cigarettes in those meeting rooms and I had a packet of Alfred Dunhill cigarettes on the table and he kept saying to me; do you mind if I have one of your cigarettes?" That was his only contribution to the EPG discussion: smoking Alfred Dunhill cigarettes. In the end, I sent the secretary out to go and buy him a packet, but he was still trying to quit smoking.

SO: OPCs?

VZ: I don't say this with any rancour, but he came with no background, no particular knowledge, nor any particular interest in Africa. He just was part of that touring group. Then there was a lady from the Caribbean -.

SO: Nita Barrow of Barbados.

VZ: - that's right, who was charming. She was very pleasant and helpful, and she was, I think, really there to try and settle nerves, if there were any, or a dispute if one arose. She was going to be the calming factor, but there really was no dispute. The conversations were really frank, they were very direct. Pik tried to be as open and straightforward with them as he could. He understood very well what their brief was, what they were coming to do, and he wanted them to be able to go back with as much information and understanding of South Africa's position as possible. So he wanted them to have full access, to fly around the Cape, to look at South Africa, to understand our problems.

He would have wanted to take them to see Matanzima in the Transkei: to see Lucas Mangope in Boputhatswana, to see Buthelezi in KwaZulu-Natal, but of course the EPG weren't allowed to, as these were not leaders recognised by the Commonwealth. So part of the debate was "Well okay, you're coming to talk to us, but you're already saying who you can't speak to, because the Commonwealth won't let you speak to Matanzima because he's Bantustan leader. So that's not politically correct, but what is the value of your report if you don't take them into account?"

This was a little bit embarrassing for them, but because the Bantustans were not recognised, they had a real dilemma. Pik was saying to them, "But you have to speak to them. They represent millions of people. They are part of what your report has to reflect. You don't have to accept what they say, but you do need to go and speak to them." They were saying, "Well, sorry, but we can't because our mandate doesn't allow us to. We can speak to Mandela who is in jail, but we can't speak to the leaders who are not in jail." So it became a bit self-defeating, that particular element of it.

SO: Did you sit in on the individual meetings that Pik Botha had with General Obasanjo? The one-on-ones?

VZ: No. My job was to be the note-taker for the meetings. I was drafting the minutes. In those days you still needed someone to actually write them up.

SO: What was the Department of Foreign Affairs' view of Anthony Barber, another member of the EPG? He had been British Chancellor of the Exchequer, and was also a director of Standard Chartered Bank. He was a particular type of British Conservative. Was he seen as arguing Mrs. Thatcher's case in any way, or as an independent individual?

VZ: No, he made no contribution at all, that I can recall. The talking was done by Obasanjo. He was the chairman and he was talking and Fraser sort of grunted every now and again, but said nothing that I can remember.

SO: So Obasanjo really led the delegation?

VZ: He led the delegation very well. He handled it exceptionally well.

SO: Did you have any dealings with Moni Malhoutra who was the Commonwealth Secretariat's designated man for following the EPG and writing up their report?

VZ: No.

SO: What of then the events on the morning of the 19th of May? This was just at the point when the EPG was to present their report, when Pik Botha was telephoned, early in the morning, by a member of the South African Defence Force to report on the bombing of the three Commonwealth capitals of Lusaka, Gaborone and Harare?

VZ: Yes. That was a complete disaster. In all the years I worked with Pik as Foreign Minister, I don't think I'd ever seen him more devastated than that. We had been through a lot over the years. We'd had our heads washed in the UN Security Council I don't know how many times. All the drama of life when you are the private secretary of the Foreign Minister, when your country is going through an excruciating time of uncertainty and turmoil, meant that you lived with him virtually every day. This was probably the darkest moment when there he was trying so hard to give Obasanjo something; to give the EPG something to take back and knowing what the obstacles were, and what the difficulties were. Then he as the Foreign Minister not even being informed that they had sent in the Mirages and attacked those three Commonwealth capitals in our neighbourhood. And there he was sitting and debating with the EPG; you know, for him it was unthinkable. He didn't believe it at first, but as it happened, as we later found out, the approval to carry out this attack had been given a month or two in advance and long before the EPG was coming, or we even knew they were coming.

Military intelligence had been watching the build-up in those capitals, looking at what was happening, and came to the conclusion that these were terrorist bases becoming a threat and needed to be dealt with; they needed to be neutralised. So they made the proposal through to PW Botha somehow, and Pik was not involved; he wasn't even aware of it. And PW had given the approval that when the time was right, if they believed that there was a threat, that there was a collection of weapons and limpet mines that would come

across our borders and kill our people, then those targets were to be taken out simultaneously.

So the planning started to carry out the attack, but it all depended on there being a clear night at all three capitals. They had to do it at night, but the weather would have to be clear, there was no advanced night vision capability at the time. So the pilots had to have a very good visual lock on the targets. Every night they were ready to go, but there was cloud cover over either one or the other, and they could not carry out their mission. So the waiting just went on and on, and on, and basically anybody who should've told Pik Botha, didn't. Then all of a sudden there was a clear night, and the pilots launched the attack. They wouldn't have known that the EPG happened to be in town, nor who they were, nor the consequences of the attack in the EPG context. They carried out an instruction as soon as conditions allowed, after waiting for weeks. They had to go and take those targets out, all three targets, and they did. The timing couldn't have been worse.

SO: But the disastrous message that this sent to the Commonwealth -.

VZ: Absolutely.

SO: - and to the EPG and to Obasanjo.

VZ: There was no way to convince Obasanjo that this was a SNAFU and you couldn't blame him. And if you couldn't convince Obasanjo, much less could you convince Fraser and the others. They were convinced this was a deliberate set-up and that we had snubbed them. Really all you could do in a case like that is say "Sorry", and shrug your shoulders and try again.

SO: Pik has mentioned that he tried in follow up letters to revive the EPG, the role of Commonwealth involvement.

VZ: Yes.

SO: Were you involved in any of those follow up letters?

VZ: Yes, I helped draft most of them. He wanted the Commonwealth, well, the EPG people in particular, and the governments they represented, to understand that whatever happened on that bad morning, which was a disaster for all of us, didn't alter the fact that South Africa still had to progress, had to make progress, had to advance. And that South Africa still needed the understanding of countries in the Commonwealth. That we weren't all of us wearing devil's horns: in spite of the demonization of South Africa, we were just normal human beings trying to find a way out of an historical situation in which we found ourselves. We wanted the outcome to be better than what we had then, but it was very easy, at that time, to conceive of an outcome that would be even worse.

So as a diplomat himself, he wanted to keep the lines of communication open and wanted to continue the engagement with the Commonwealth. As I said at the beginning, although we were not members of the Commonwealth, he always took the Commonwealth seriously. He understood that it had a role to play that was positive, that was constructive, and that we would one day be back in the Commonwealth again. He had that foresight and he was probably

the only one in the cabinet who thought along those lines. But he was the only one who had lived abroad as a diplomat. The others hadn't and that was a fundamental difference between them. He understood the world in a way they didn't, so they spoke a different language.

SO: Indeed. How far was the Department for Foreign Affairs also using back channels to the United Kingdom, to Mrs Thatcher's government, as a way to try and keep those lines of communication open? To keep some of South Africa's few friends in the international community supportive while the slow, faltering steps towards reform were being initiated?

VZ: Yes, there were people in the Thatcher government, or in Britain, who had access to Mrs Thatcher. One was Sir Dennis himself, the other -.

SO: Did you use contacts with Sir Dennis Thatcher?

VZ: Well, South Africans knew him. I believe he was on the board of a company, or had personal links of some kind, and came to South Africa occasionally. When it was necessary to send a message through informal channels someone would deliver it. Their son came every now and again, lived here for a while, at one time. The other was Laurens Van der Post who could always be relied upon to go around and have a cup of tea with Margaret and Dennis, and convey a message. I'm sure there were others that I don't necessarily know about.

SO: I'm thinking through the more formal back channels of your ambassador in London. Pik Botha has described that his contribution to letters in response to Thatcher's own missives to PW Botha was in drafting them; that he would indicate via the back channel to the South African ambassador, "Please say there's a letter coming, she's not to take affront or offence at any particular phraseology." Were you aware of this particular technique of his to try to soften blows that might be -.

VZ: Yes, when Denis Worrall was Ambassador, and later I think it might have been Kent Durr, who had been Minister of Trade and Industry.

SO: I'll check that, don't worry.

VZ: What would happen was that we in the Foreign Ministry would prepare a draft according to Pik's basic outlines and one of us, it was usually me, would write it. If it was going to go under PW's signature, it would go in draft form to PW and occasionally they would change the phraseology, change our terminology because they did not accept the way we framed the message. We'd written these letters specifically to convey Pik's message and PW would put a line through them and would rewrite key sentences.

SO: Was it written in Afrikaans and then translated into English?

VZ: No, it was written in English. I'd be given an oral outline in Afrikaans. I'd go and write it in English. Then give Pik the draft; he might play with it a bit. Those were the days before laptops and all that sort of thing. So we had a lady sitting there with a typewriter, three carbon copies, clack, clack, clack, typing out the revised draft. We would send the draft over and it would come back with PW's signature, but with some alterations. This caught Pik in a very

difficult situation because he had no choice but to send the letter as approved and signed by PW Botha. But he did not want it to be misunderstood when it arrived at the other end. So he would say to the ambassador, “Look, there are letters coming, but please here’s the actual draft.”

SO: So she’d get two versions?

VZ: Or an oral interpretation of what the actual message was intended to be... because someone like PW Botha would think in Afrikaans and his staff would translate it into his English, which on occasion was almost incomprehensible, you didn't understand what he was saying. You could easily read it the wrong way, or it could be ambiguous and Pik had specifically not wanted that formulation, but he had no choice. So he had to send a letter, it had to go to the British Prime Minster, but he was saying, “Oh, my God, you know, when it lands on her desk what on earth is she going to think?” So he had to find a way to deflect the problem: to take the thorn out of the message, so yes that happened.

SO: I’m very struck by the way that actually this is officials talking to officials, not leaders talking to leaders because Mrs. Thatcher’s letters were drafted by her key advisor Charles Powell. So actually you were communicating with Charles Powell!

VZ: That’s right, absolutely, and I remember meeting him at Chequers and he was awfully kind and very nice to me, a very nice man. So we did have to have the back channel. Laurens Van der Post I know was very helpful. There were others that I don't know about. I know they existed, not always who they were, because it happened on a level that was beyond my pay grade.

SO: Pik himself has described the EPG as ultimately successful and as an important contributor to transition in the Possible Negotiating Concept, which was drafted for the EPG, forming a vital starting point for the National Party after Mandela was released and after discussions began. Would you agree with that interpretation?

VZ: Yes, I would, in the sense that it took the interests of all South Africans into account and proposed movement towards a constitution that all South Africans could buy into, leading to a country governed by the rule of law: where the constitution would be the highest law of the land, and could accommodate our various pre-conditions. It showed what the end result could look like, and that was something the South African government could work with. Rather than simply capitulating to the ANC, and the ANC becomes the interim government, and they arrange the elections, etc., which many were demanding at the time.

SO: So the Possible Negotiating Concept was vital for the South African government as a starting point, for the National Party?

VZ: Yes.

SO: Okay. Yes, so going towards CODESA I.

VZ: Absolutely. Remember the demand from the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity was that the ANC were to be regarded as the

sole legal representatives of the South African people. Therefore the South African government of the National Party simply had to hand over power to them. That was the governing logic of the OAU and the United Nations in numerous resolutions. But what the Commonwealth was saying was, "No. We need to have a democracy here where all South Africans have a right to play a role. This is not simply a question of handing power to the ANC. It's handing power to the people of South Africa."

SO: So that means BCM (Black Conscious Movement), Inkhata, and the PAC had to be involved.

VZ: They all have a role and they should be at the negotiating table too. Now that was not in the ANC's agenda at all. They were simply going to take power. So this was something they initially were not comfortable with. You must remember who their friends in the world were, you know, it was the Soviet Union and there were the Gaddafis, the Cubans of the world. So their instincts were not democratic. Also on the side of the National Party government the concern was that this was an old British problem. Very well intended. When the British left their colonies, when they left Swaziland for example, they left them a lovely constitution just like the one they wanted to give us, and that did not last for very long. It was King Sobhuza II who one day wanted to do something and his advisors said, "Your Majesty, there's a piece of paper, the British call it a constitution. That piece of paper says you can't just do this." "Well, then we'll tear up the piece of paper."

That happened throughout what was now independent Anglophone Africa. The Ugandans, the Kenyans, all were left with lovely constitutions and where were they now? None of them were still in operation. So the National Party also took a little bit of convincing at the time that this notion of the constitutional path that the Commonwealth was proposing was a viable route. There were voices in the National Party that said, "Well, ask our British friends where in their former African colonies is there still a constitution that the last governor left when he got on the ship? Nowhere, unless maybe India or somewhere, but where in Africa?" So this was the debate. So on the one side the National Party was dubious about the value of this proposal, but if it could be implemented and if it could stick, well, then maybe we had something we could work with. The ANC itself was not interested, initially. Their demand was for a transfer of power, to them alone.

SO: Vic, you've been talking very eloquently about transition in South Africa. In the same way that historians argue about when was the end of the Cold War? How did the Cold War end? It seems that there is just as much of an intense debate within South Africa about when transition was, and how was transition? You've mentioned elsewhere about the racial components, the economic components, the military components, the political. Can we say that the Commonwealth did have agency in transition, or is that to overstate the role of the Commonwealth, or individual countries such as Britain as facilitators in that process?

VZ: I think the Commonwealth did play a constructive role. It would be a mistake to overstate it, but it would also be a mistake to underplay the role that the Commonwealth had. The EPG was a very important process, even though we landed up with those very unfortunate circumstances in 1986. They nevertheless gave the South African government an opportunity to

understand that here was this body representing more than 50 odd countries in the world, willing to listen and understand. The key thing was that it was headed by somebody like Obasanjo who could spell out to South Africa an alternative vision that South Africa itself, at the time, was too scared or maybe too hesitant to consider, and to imagine an end point that we could aspire to.

So I think that was useful, and I think that Britain's role was even more so. Britain was under tremendous pressure from large numbers of countries in the Commonwealth to force stricter, more punitive economic and other measures against South Africa, and Britain was feeling that that wasn't helpful. You might land up with a revolution or something worse. In the broader geopolitical scheme of things those were still Cold War days. The prospect of South Africa landing up in the Soviet camp was not altogether -.

SO: Outside the realm of possibility?

VZ: Exactly, and whatever existed of South Africa's nuclear capacity falling into those hands was not attractive to them. There were a lot of other considerations as well. But Britain played a very responsible role in guiding the Commonwealth to maintain contact and dialogue with the South African government, rather than simply isolating and rejecting it as an illegitimate government the way the UN and the OAU had done. So in that sense it was very constructive.

SO: Were you in Namibia in the April of 1989? Pik Botha described a particular incident in which Britain was seen, and Mrs Thatcher was seen to play a role in helping South Africa?

VZ: Actually no: at that time I was still Consul-General in California (1986 – 1990) and I came back to South Africa a year later. So, no I wasn't there at the time.

SO: So you missed that particular fraught event?

VZ: I missed that particular one, yes.

SO: Vic, what was your view and position then watching how Foreign Affairs helped in South Africa's negotiations for transition? So much of the discussion seems to lead up to the role of the Commonwealth in, as you've pointed to, assisting, facilitating the initiation of negotiations; Thatcher's own contribution to the weight of the scales for releasing Mandela and De Klerk's announcement in February of 1990. But what about the DFA and the period '90 to '94, because that's an equally critical period for South Africa in negotiating the unlikely peaceful transition? How important do you think was the outside world in supporting South Africa? Supporting the National Party? That it should accommodate and give up power.

VZ: It's a good question and there are various elements to it. The first and most important was that the countries of the world had to be convinced that the process of reform that De Klerk and his government had embarked upon was "irreversible". That was the word. Everything hung around its "irreversibility". So all of a sudden we found ourselves in a situation where diplomats and foreign ministers from countries that we'd never had any relations with at all, knocking on our door in the Union Buildings and wanting to establish

diplomatic missions, embassies in South Africa, but wanting the assurance from us that this process was irreversible. Very often, Pik himself couldn't see three or four at once. So people like me and others also dealt with these delegations, that's how many there were. They were not only from other countries, but from regional organisations and from agencies and all sorts of institutions. We made the point to them very clearly that the South African government was not the only party to the negotiations.

So we could only talk for the South Africa government; if they wanted to know what the ANC's view was, well, "Go and talk to them or the BCM, but we can tell you from the South African government point of view there is no Plan B. There is no going back. We have to make this work. It's in everybody's interest for this to work. We don't know the outcome, we're going into a negotiating situation now, we don't know what the final result is going to be, but we know what our bottom line is. The bottom line is that this has to be a constitutional democracy, where the rule of law prevails and that no one party can dominate any other party. And if it doesn't meet those requirements then it isn't going anywhere, but we have no intention of reversing anything here." Pik Botha started as a key player in the negotiations, but shortly thereafter he withdrew and Roelf Meyer became the point man with Cyril Ramaphosa, in the day-to-day negotiations.

SO: So did Pik Botha withdraw through choice? Or he was deliberately told to focus on his brief of foreign affairs?

VZ: I think his brief in foreign affairs because our whole interaction in the world was changing fundamentally. So he had to be there to deal with that. The second part of it, though, was that among themselves, the senior leaders of the National Party saw Pik's role as more effective as a deadlock breaking mechanism. So they pulled him out of the day-to-day management of the negotiations until there was a deadlock and there was a bust up.

SO: And there were a number.

VZ: And there were. And then someone had to go to Mandela and say, "Okay, we've reached a deadlock. We have to break this deadlock."

SO: So unlike De Klerk's own autobiography which emphasises very much his individual meetings with Mandela, in fact there were other -?

VZ: There were, there were others -.

SO: - other meetings.

VZ: - because de Klerk and Mandela couldn't see eye-to-eye, there was no chemistry.

SO: That's very evident from the way he writes.

VZ: But there was with Pik. I attended, I don't know how many dinners at Mandela's house in Houghton and in other places where there were three on each side: it was Mandela, Mbeki and Mathews Phosa or Aziz Pahad on the ANC side; and there was Pik, Rusty Evans and me. There were usually six of us. These were off-the-record dinners. Some of them dealt with the future of

the Department of Foreign Affairs on the grounds that no matter how radical a domestic political change you have, foreign policy isn't affected in exactly the same way. There is some continuity; you still are the same country with the same borders. The same teachers get up the next morning and go and teach. The same pilots fly commercial aircraft. The same ship captains carry goods abroad. But your foreign policy is a little bit different from domestic policy. So how are we going to handle this? How are we going to restructure the foreign ministry and how are we going to realign our interaction with the world? That was part of those discussions, and at times they were also used to break deadlocks. When de Klerk and Mandela would have a public bust up or even a private one, and Mandela simply flat out refused to speak to him, the one person he would always speak to and respected was Pik. He knew that if anyone had tried to get him released from prison, it was Pik. And he wanted to say thank you for that.

SO: Were there other key Commonwealth individuals who were helping smooth the path, such as the British Ambassador, Robin Renwick?

VZ: He had a great role. He was very active, very helpful, great insight and one of those ambassadors who really had a very good grasp of his brief. And was actively talking to everybody, playing a helpful role, in fact he is fondly remembered probably as the best British Ambassador we ever had in South Africa, that I can remember in my time.

SO: I think that he learnt a phenomenal amount with Christopher Soames and Anthony Duff in the process of transition in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe in 1979-1980.

VZ: Zimbabwe, yes.

SO: I'm not in any way down playing Renwick's own enormous intellectual and analytical capabilities.

VZ: Plus his personality: people respected him. They had faith in him, they believed in him and the man was genuinely sincere and extremely capable and had access to everybody. There were no doors in this country that were closed to him, which meant he could be extremely effective and he played them with enormous integrity. So I think he deserves to be given credit absolutely for that.

SO: What about General Obasanjo? I know that Nigeria was one of the first stopping off points, after Mandela's release, for Pik Botha.

VZ: Yes, oddly enough I can't explain this because I don't know why, but it seems that relations with the ANC soured a little. But I don't know what the background was. Obasanjo was the flavour of the month for a while. It could be that he was seen as too sympathetic to the white South African government. Or too willing to hear them out. Not treating them like an enemy. That could have been part of it, I'm speculating, I don't know for sure.

SO: I wonder if in any way that the fact that new Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, who was himself a Nigerian, played a possible part -?

VZ: That's quite possible.

SO: - in that?

VZ: That's perfectly possible. I don't know, but my sense certainly is that the ANC love affair with Obasanjo didn't last very long. So something went wrong there and I don't know what happened.

SO: What about international pressure on the South African government at critical points? I'm thinking of the Night of the Generals when America was identified as being one of the factors pushing De Klerk into removing 23 members of his military because of accusations that they were involved in covert operations, in illegal military activities to stimulate descent with violence between the ANC and Inkhata. Does that chime in with your memory that America was playing a pressurising role here?

VZ: I don't know if I have enough information at my disposal to say whether that is right or not, but I suspect it is. Remember that when De Klerk became president, he had no military background. All those generals owed their allegiance to PW Botha. For a generation when PW was defence minister, then Prime Minister or President, they had direct access to him, and owed their careers to him. They had developed a way of doing things, and of communicating directly with PW; carrying out all kinds of operations, and De Klerk became president feeling very insecure and out of the loop. He became head of the party and the next thing he was head of state, and these generals were continuing to carry on as if nothing had happened. He felt he couldn't be president if they were continuing to do things in his name or in the name of the state, and he's supposed to be the president. But the generals never saw any need to inform him about anything; they just carried on as before. So this was heading for a clash and, if I understand correctly, de Klerk warned them on a number of occasions saying, "Look gentlemen, you might not like it, but I am the president and you will bring this sort of thing to me. You're not going to continue as if nothing has happened."

SO: There is civilian control of the military.

VZ: Exactly. They probably said, "Yes, well okay", but then they carried on anyway, because in practice it was the colonels and the majors and the lieutenants that were actually doing these things; it wasn't the generals. So when he overreacted, and it was an overreaction, he fired some people who he should never have fired. There were people who probably, as it later came out, were wrongly fired in that process. But there were others, the majority who were probably correctly fired. They would argue the opposite; they would say they were doing what soldiers do. They were told to go and beat the enemy. "Now what are we supposed to do? Go and talk to them? We're going to fight them. If you don't want us to do it, then tell us so and get someone else to sort your problem out. There's only one way to deal with this, there are certain problems you can only fix with military force. That is what soldiers are for".

SO: Were you in the Department of Foreign Affairs ever privately concerned that there might be a right wing coup?

VZ: No.

SO: So this was just music in the background of conservative far-right opposite to negotiations?

VZ: Yes, there were a few romantics, if you can call them that, on the far right wing who had that notion. That's stretching the word a bit, but on the right wing fringe there were some who believed the volk would rise. The volk would not take this, the volk would not take that: so far and no further...there was a bottom line. At some point you'd reach this bottom line and every farmer with his pitchfork would arrive in his pickup truck and the revolution would start. Realistically? No. I had spent my life, when I had the time, on farms, game ranches, in the bush, in wilderness areas, as a hunter and a fisherman all over this country, virtually everywhere. I knew a lot of these so-called right wing farmers, I knew their sympathies, I knew their concerns and what motivated them. I'd sat around campfires with them, hunted with them, and spent time listening to them. I thought I understood them well enough to know that at heart they are very decent people, and don't want to fight with anybody. This notion of a right wing backlash was a political pipe dream and as it turned out, while we had the Terre'blanche phenomenon for a period, and a few other crackpots, none of them seriously amounted to a challenge. The ANC tended to dramatise this more it needed to be, I sometimes thought.

SO: Playing the political card more than a real card in their day? I've asked you about the Commonwealth and individual Commonwealth countries as a facilitating factor supporting in the role of South Africa's transition and the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and international affairs as the vital backdrop to it. But what of the Front Line States? Did they play a particular role between '90 and '94?

VZ: Yes.

SO: In what way and whom?

VZ: Okay, let's start with Zambia, with Kaunda. Bear in mind it was for him equally important to end the war in Angola as it was for us. It was for him equally important to get the Cubans out of Angola. Zambia shares a border with Angola and that part of Angola that bordered Zambia was under UNITA control. UNITA was the government of that part of Angola and if you crossed the border it was UNITA that stamped your passport. It wasn't the MPLA, and for a long time this ongoing war in Angola was a fundamental problem for Kaunda and he wanted to play in the role of an honest broker. Because he was sitting with tens of thousands of long term refugees from Angola, from that war. In a country where Kaunda couldn't feed his own people let alone refugees coming across the border, they were becoming a political problem for him.

So he felt that if anybody could play the honest broker, he could, and he did, with all credit to him. I went with Pik, Magnus Malan, and the Administrator General of South West Africa, to Lusaka several times where we had a morning meeting in State House, and President Kaunda would get a briefing from the Administrator General, from our Defence Minister and our Foreign Minister on the strategic situation in Angola and Namibia. He would then

explain to us what some of his pressures and problems were, and suggest that we should please regard him as someone who would try to help.

SO: So this is in the 1980s?

VZ: Yes, but also later. I don't remember when Kaunda left office actually.

SO: 1991.

VZ: Yes. Up until that point he was active, he played a role, he was helpful. His successor was really not a factor, he was not on the playing field. So if we're talking about the Front Line States and what role they played, up until '91 Zambia played quite an important role because we also knew that when we had finished at State House, after a morning meeting and lunch with Kaunda, and got on our plane and went home, the ANC leadership would be the next ones in his office, as their Head Office was in Lusaka. So any message we wanted to get to the ANC we left with Kaunda. He would tell us, "We will see the ANC this afternoon and we'll convey your message". You couldn't help but like him, he was a likeable person in that sense.

On the side of Mozambique we had negotiated the Nkomati Accord. That was a very different sort of relationship because there were ANC operatives in Mozambique who were coming across the border with limpet mines and smuggling guns, and they were robbing banks. As I said earlier, bombs were going off in supermarkets, people were being killed on the side of the road. This was the liberation struggle in its terrorist manifestation where things were really beginning to look not so good at all. Most of that was coming from Mozambique or via Swaziland. So the South African government's message to Samora Machel was, "You had better stop this or the price is going to be higher than you want it to be."

The negotiation of the Nkomati Accord took two years at least. There was some very hard talking. They said to us, "Look, it's one thing for you to say that the ANC insurgents are coming across our border, but they're also coming across your border. So you also have a responsibility on your side, it's not only ours." We were arguing to them, "You've got a choice. You either kick the ANC out of Mozambique or we kick your butt from here to the Equator. So that's your choice. We're not taking one more bomb going off; if one more farmer gets hurt in the eastern Transvaal we are going to let you know where that bomb came from. And you don't want to know what the price is going to be, so you choose." They realised this was a very serious negotiation and they agreed. So they kicked the ANC out of Mozambique. We concluded the Nkomati Accord and unfortunately on our side we did not honour that Accord as we should have, but neither did the Mozambicans. There were elements in our military that continued to assist RENAMO after we had undertaken not to do so. That was a great embarrassment to us.

SO: When did you find that out?

VZ: Oh, that was -.

SO: The Accord broke down within the year.

VZ: It took a while, because having concluded the signing of the Accord which was in about March '84 there was a lull; some months went by, and then the Mozambique government started saying to us, "Your army is still helping RENAMO." We were saying, "But they can't be, we signed an Accord, they can't be doing that. What evidence have you got?" And they would say they'd received reports from rural villages, of military supplies coming in. Planes were landing at night and there were movements of soldiers and equipment. We would think, "That cannot possibly be. These people are smoking something." Then as it turned out, these reports were grossly exaggerated, but there was some truth in them, and that had to be stopped. And it was stopped.

Military people sometimes do unexpected things in conflict situations. The people on the South African military side who had risked their lives to help RENAMO had bought into the whole RENAMO struggle emotionally and psychologically, and to tell them at that stage that they had to stop and leave those people to a certain death was not something they could stomach. They knew the FRELIMOs would kill them. The villagers who supported RENAMO would be wiped out, and their wives and children raped and murdered by FRELIMO... which is what sometimes happened. We sold them down the river; that's essentially what happened in favour of that Accord, in the view of those SA military personnel who had become committed to RENAMO. These peace accords are never simple things. They have a lot of other implications that you don't always anticipate, and for many in REMAMO it meant the end for them. Having once been their allies, we abandoned them to their fate.

So it's a bit like you'll understand what the Poles felt about Churchill after World War II; it was a similar sort of situation. Once RENAMO had been disarmed they were sitting ducks, and this upset a lot of the SA military people who had been involved in supporting them. These things always have unintended consequences. It did mean that we were able to secure our eastern border. Our northern border was secure. Mugabe had won the election in 1980 so a peace of sorts, a very imperfect peace, but a peace of sorts had come to the northern border. The eastern border was secured by the Nkomati Accord. So what then remained was Namibia and Angola. So I'm making a long story of this, but Botswana played a very helpful role in allowing us to use their facilitates, their convention facilities and so forth for meetings with SWAPO and other -.

SO: When did that start?

VZ: This is the late '80s, early '90s, 1991. At one stage the PAC refused to negotiate with the South African government in South Africa. They would only negotiate on neutral territory and so we negotiated with the PAC in Botswana. Also some of the final details that had to do with the independence process in Namibia, Botswana was very helpful. Also they hosted many delegations coming to visit South Africa who wanted to talk to us about diplomatic relations, but because of their own domestic government regulations that did not allow them to stay in South Africa, they went through the fiction of staying overnight in Gaberone.

Their governments allowed them to transit South Africa if they were going on to Lesotho or Swaziland or somewhere in the neighbouring countries. If they had to fly from any distance they had to come via Johannesburg's Jan Smuts

Airport, as it was then. They could transit South Africa, but weren't allowed to put a foot in the country or stay here, unless they needed urgent medical treatment. Now all of a sudden, the situation changed and we were going into a negotiating process. So there were delegations from Nigeria and Pakistan, and heaven knows where else. They were all coming and showing an interest and wanting to talk to us; but they would overnight in Gaborone so they could actually fly in and, technically while in transit, come to the Union buildings and have a chat, do some shopping, and go. I'm not making this up; it took them a while to change the regulations. We had a lot of that, and Botswana always had a very moderate, very sensible, very pragmatic way of dealing with these issues, and wanted to be helpful.

Lesotho and Swaziland were, in the nature of the case, dependent on the Southern African Customs Union and were always caught between the devil and the deep blue sea in the sense that they hosted the ANC there. They could not otherwise, they were Commonwealth countries, but entirely dependent on South Africa. So if South Africa had switched the taps off that would have been the end of them. We never did that, but they were never really a factor. Nyerere, in Tanzania, was never liked. There was never going to be any prospect of a discussion or any kind of cooperation between him and the South African government at the time. He was regarded as an opportunist, a particularly dishonest one, but he was the darling of the European left, so it didn't matter what he did. But if you looked at how he governed his own country, and what the consequences were for his people, that was something else. So that essentially covers most of them I think.

SO: You covered them all. I just want to ask you in conclusion then, the DFA's role in managing the TBVC States because they were recognised by South Africa as being formerly independent. Was this also part of the negotiations and the diplomacy of transition? What was the DFA's relationship with these Bantustans - were you acting as facilitators or channels for their view towards the South African government, or were their leadership in direct discussions with the multi-party negotiation committee?

VZ: They were in direct discussions at least for a while. Their national budgets depended on the South African Parliament. Parliament would vote the amount which would then be channelled via the Department of Foreign Affairs because technically they were foreign countries. So their budget was foreign development aid, so to speak, from the SA foreign ministry to Transkei, Boputhatswana, Venda and Ciskei. They were very much part of the political debate in this country. I can well remember when Pik was chastised and repudiated by PW for arguing in favour of Mandela's release. One of the first people to support him was Kaiser Matanzima, who was the president of Transkei. Matanzima said to Pik, "Let PW Botha release him, let him come to Transkei. He's my subject. He is from the Transkei, he is a citizen, he's my citizen not yours. Release him into my custody. He can come here and live in Transkei freely. No one will interfere with him, he can live as a free man; he can do whatever he likes. He's paid his price, he's been in jail, but he will be a citizen according to the laws of the Transkei." That was not going to work, but it's just by way of saying that people like him and Lucas Mangope and others were part of the debate around the political future.

Of course, these TBVC countries were very concerned about a future political dispensation whereby they would lose their independence. So having granted them independence we were on the verge of taking it away. The National Party was the only one that could take it away. This was going to turn out to be a very unpleasant set of circumstances. So right from the beginning it was the view of the National Party government that they could not be excluded. They were going to be part of a future South Africa. They were part of the leadership whether one liked it or not, or recognised them or not, the fact was that they were and their views had to be taken into account.

I had to go with Pik one evening to Lucas Mangope to inform him that he was no longer president of Boputhatswana. That was a very tense, very difficult encounter. Mac Maharaj was also there because someone from the ANC had to come along. We went to Mangope's house, by helicopter. We had surrounded the place with the military, so tense was the situation.

Pik said to him, "Mr. President, I've come to tell you that you've been constitutionally removed. You're no longer president of this country", and this got into a very nasty debate. Mangope eventually asked, "May I ask you one thing: can I go on television tonight to tell my people that there's been a coup and you have removed me?" Pik said, "No, I'll tell the people." And we got on the helicopter and went back. That was a decision taken by the Transitional Executive Council, the TEC. As we approached 1994 it was agreed that all major decisions were still constitutionally the responsibility of the National Party, but they would first consult with the ANC through this TEC arrangement because the National Party government wasn't willing to simply hand over power unconstitutionally to the ANC.

SO: I have two last questions. I'm very conscious of trespassing on your time. One concerns the bureaucratic silos I've made reference to - the administrative differences of organisational responsibilities in the South African government. Did the Department of Foreign Affairs have dealings or close contact with Niel Barnard and his intelligence agency, in terms of being one of the key initiators in reaching out to explore contacts with the ANC? Were you aware of this in the early part of the 1980s? The second question concerns South African and the Commonwealth post '94. So if I could ask you about the DFA and Niel Barnard's organisation.

VZ: On the first part, yes; there were interdepartmental structures at a fairly senior level. That was loosely called the intelligence community, which included Niel Barnard's organisation. It included military intelligence, foreign affairs and police, and others whose work had to do with the security of the country.

SO: The security family?

VZ: Yes, that sort of thing and yes, bear in mind that as the war in Angola continued, particularly in the latter part of the '80s, Foreign Affairs became alienated from Defence. It became very, very difficult for us to try and conduct normal day-to-day diplomacy when the SA Defence Force felt no restraint about cross-border raids. Once you send armed detachments across the border into another country it's a serious matter. But the military didn't see it that way. They were going to deal with terrorists and that was their job, and what else were they supposed to do? From their perspective the diplomats

were talking endlessly in New York, had been doing so for years, but the situation on the ground remained perilous and they had a responsibility to protect citizens from being killed by terrorists coming over the border.

So it was a very difficult debate. Also the Defence Force arrogated to themselves the right to start issuing foreign policy statements and political statements without consulting Foreign Affairs. So there would be a skirmish somewhere in Ovamboland and the Defence Force would issue a statement to the effect that, "We've had this battle and so many people were killed, and SWAPO has finally been broken as a political organisation." They would say something completely ridiculous like that. Twenty years later SWAPO still governs Namibia.

SO: Yes, Magnus Malan makes exactly this sort of reference in his autobiography.

VZ: Yes, these were ridiculous statements and so we would go to our military people and say, "For heaven's sake, this is not your job, you're the guys with the guns; you go and shoot the guns. If you want to release a press statement, let us shoot with the pen. You can't do both because, believe me, you don't shoot very well with a gun to start with, but when it comes to a pen it's a complete disaster. So do what you do best, and leave us to do what we do best." They were saying, "No. You diplomats just talk. Talk endlessly in New York and there's resolution 43- this and 43- that, but we're bleeding on the ground, we're getting shot. How long do you think we're going to sit around and wait for you to come to a resolution?"

So we had a fundamental cultural difference. Where the Defence Force felt that as long as they had a big enough gun, they could shoot any problem away. And if the problems got bigger? Well, they would get a bigger gun, and shoot the problem away until it's not there anymore. Our view was, no, there is no military solution to many of these things. You can fight until the cows come home, but sooner or later, as the body count piles up; someone's going to have to negotiate a cease-fire and peace. Create the circumstances for peace that do not themselves represent the preconditions for another war. We try to do this as best we can. That's our job. You cannot do that with a gun, no matter how big it is. And please don't make press statements.

Now in this debate we had our allies - Niel Barnard was one. They understood that there was no military solution: that the military had a role to play, but at some point you needed to end the conflict, and the sooner you could do that the better, because if you could negotiate from a position of strength, you would not find yourself in the position that Ian Smith found himself in. Where you keep saying "No, no, no", until eventually when you're saying "No", nobody's listening. You've lost the power to say "No." If you know that the end result is going to be you sitting across the table with an opponent, then you choose the time and the circumstances under which that's going to happen, and you set the agenda for that discussion. So the sooner you can do that the better because our position was still stronger than SWAPO's and the Angolans'. They could not defeat us militarily, but we could not lose the opportunity to make peace on favourable terms.

So the position of Foreign Affairs and Intelligence was that the time to start finding a route to political solution was now, not later. Otherwise a long drawn

out war would exhaust us in human terms, also financially, in terms of political capital and in every conceivable way. And in the end we would be forced into a situation where peace terms would be dictated to us, as happened to Ian Smith. So if you want to have any say in the peace terms then you need to do it at the right time. Defence saw it completely differently. So we did have that in the bureaucracy, the silos that you talk about; we had Foreign Affairs and Intelligence on one side of the debate, and Defence and the Police on a different mission.

SO: I know that Niel Barnard was making probes, reaching out to the ANC, and he was doing it with a very narrow circle. As far as you know, was he in contact with Pik Botha about that?

VZ: No.

SO: Okay, so these were very much on his own initiative?

VZ: Directly to PW Botha. Remember that Pik was at that point regarded as a maverick, a loose cannon, who could not always be trusted by the securocrats. He was publicly making noises about releasing Mandela which had all kinds of implications. He was pressing PW to consider Mandela's release. PW wanted to know whether he could do so. So Niel Barnard and people like Jannie Roux who reported directly to PW, started looking at the options and making early probes, in order to advise PW on the choices available to him.

The preliminary discussions were to consider how we could choreograph Mandela's release and stage-manage the aftermath. Because we couldn't simply one day open the prison door and ask him to leave. There had to be an agreement as to how this would be done in a way that benefited everybody, that didn't lead to complete chaos. That's why PW said he had conditions, and it took a while to make him understand that you couldn't do it on his conditions. PW's view was that the South African public, his voters, would never understand if you just opened the door and let him out. Then the townships might blow up, with bloodshed in the streets. How would you end that? How would you stop it? Pik was saying, "Well, talk to Mandela. It doesn't have to be that way. We can come to some kind of sensible arrangement and agree on the conditions with Mandela. Make sure Mandela understands the conditions, but we don't have to make it a public precondition. You can't humiliate him." So that was done and took a number of years.

They first released Govan Mbeki and Walter Sisulu. These were trial runs and they worked. But we reached a point where PW himself could not quite come to a final decision, a bridge he could not quite cross, but he had a stroke and when he resigned FW de Klerk became leader of the Party. At that point Pik considered leaving politics and he went to FW and said, "There are two things that you need to do." Essentially they were conditions under which Pik would remain in politics. One was the release of Mandela, and the other was the nuclear weapons programme; that had to be entirely shut down.

FW replied that he had already decided to take those steps, and that was August '89. It took another five or six months before Mandela was released. By then they were in discussions with various opposition parties, trying to make sure that the release of Mandela could be a global event, a joyous

event, that would be peaceful and everybody would be happy. It was very easy for it to turn the other way if you didn't manage the thing properly. I don't know who actually did all the stage management, but it wasn't badly done.

SO: No, you certainly held the initiative there. Just to wrap up: South Africa and the Commonwealth immediately after the elections of April of '94. Where were you in the Department of Foreign Affairs at that particular point?

VZ: I was Director of the Minister's Office during the transition, and one day Pik Botha walked out after having been Foreign Minister for 18 years or so. Off he went to the Ministry of Minerals and Energy Affairs and he took most of his personal staff with him. I decided to stay and the next day in walked Alfred Nzo as the new Foreign Minister. Mandela was inaugurated on the 10th of May 1994, so this was a day or two after the inauguration. So in walked Alfred Nzo and I showed him to his office. He'd never been in the Union Buildings before.

It was interesting that here was a party coming into office, but they'd never been in Parliament before or in the Union Buildings. They didn't know where to sit in Parliament or normal parliamentary procedures. Who's the Speaker, what does he do, and how do things work around here? One couldn't blame them - having been excluded all those years, they didn't really have a great deal of understanding of what a minister actually does or what the constitution allows him to do. What can he sign and what can't he sign? Anyway, I was told there's a gentleman down at the gate. He says his name is Nzo, he says he's the Minister.

SO: You had to say to Security, "You need to let him in"?

VZ: The policeman on duty at the entrance said, "Oh yeah? Oh, really, this guy? He's the Minister?" I said, "Look, just shut up now. Ask him to sit down. I'm coming to fetch him." I went to fetch Alfred Nzo.

You have to understand South Africa to see the humour in this, but it was entertaining. Alfred Nzo certainly saw the funny side of it. I took Nzo to his office and told him, "That's where you sit." He'd never seen a desk that big. We arranged a cup of tea, sat down, and I told him who was who in the Ministerial office: told him where I came from, what my background was. At that point I offered to stand down. I said, "I understand entirely if you wish to bring in your own staff." He said, "No, I want to bring in my own support staff, but I'd like you to stay. Would you be willing to stay for a year or two and help me?" I said, "Yes." At that time I'd already been back in SA for more than four years. I was both exhausted and exhilarated by the events of those years, but it had taken a toll on me and on my family. I was ready for a change, and I think it showed.

My rotation time had come, and I said, "I may have to go abroad again, but I'm happy to stay if it's going to help you." He said, "Yes, okay, let's start on that basis. I want to bring in my own private secretary and administrative secretary, a driver, and one or two others. But I want you to stay as head of the office." Then he said, "Let's just start working on our immediate priorities. 1) We join the OAU, that's number one. 2) We join the Non-Aligned Movement. 3) We get our seat back in the General Assembly of the United

Nations. 4) We get our governorship back in the International Atomic Energy Agency. 5) We rejoin the Commonwealth. That was his sequence. So I went back to my office and phoned Salim Ahmed Salim, head of the OAU, and said: "We are a new South Africa. Can we join your club?" We did not have to fill out an application form. He was over the moon and excited, and he said, "Please come on May 25 " - that was about two weeks away – "May 25th is Africa Day. We want to have a big ceremony in Addis Ababa. We want to raise the South African flag among the African nations of the OAU. We want to welcome you into the African family of nations." So we got a plane and went; we had a joyous day in Addis Ababa and South Africa became a member of the OAU. Then we were on the plane back to Pretoria when the pilots relayed a message; don't stop at Waterkloof Air Force Base, carry on to Cape Town because the Minister has to make his maiden speech in Parliament the next day on South Africa's new foreign policy. This caught Alfred Nzo entirely by surprise. So he asked me to write his maiden speech. I sat on the plane there and thought: I've been writing this kind of thing for Pik for years. Now I'm writing it for an entirely different government and the Minister has his own staff on the plane. I said, "You've got your own ANC staff; let them write it!" "No, no, you know how a speech must look like for Parliament - only eight or ten minutes or something like that". I knew Alfred had a fairly slow delivery and an eight-minute speech would not be long, but it would lay down the basic outlines for the Mandela government's new foreign policy. I wrote it out on the plane and when we landed at Ysterplaat Air Force Base in Cape Town I took it straight to the office, to one of the secretaries who typed it out. And 19 years later it hasn't changed much. If you look at the formulations; I just sucked them out of my thumb on the aeroplane coming back from Addis Ababa, and some of it is still exactly word for word -.

SO: Here's the template?

VZ: You know, it had been extrapolated from a lot of other things that had happened, but the basic heart and soul of the stuff is still the same thing. Subsequently we joined the Non-Aligned Movement. As it happened there was a NAM meeting in Cairo. We joined in Cairo, and the following year there was the Bandung 40th anniversary meeting of NAM in Indonesia, which we went to. We went to Vienna to reclaim our position in the IAEA: we went to New York to reclaim our seat in the UN General Assembly; and the last one was the Commonwealth.

That was in Westminster Abbey, I think it was June 1995 and Mandela couldn't go to it. He sent Thabo Mbeki. I think Mandela had just an eye operation or something, and couldn't travel. So off we went to London for South Africa's readmission to the Commonwealth. We had the service in the Abbey. For me, one of the endearing moments was to see the Queen Mother, who was then very elderly, struggling a little bit, but there she was. She'd been ill. It was as if nothing would keep her away; and brave, and you know, there's something about the Queen Mother at that ceremony that you just had to love. Looking very elegant and very dignified and there she came walking up the aisle. I thought, "My God, there's something lovely about that!"

Then Tutu delivered himself of a, I don't know if you'd call it a sermon, from the pulpit. But with Tutu you never quite know whether it's a sermon or a political speech or a mixture of the two. Anyway, we were admitted to the Commonwealth and we had a big function at Marlborough House shortly after

that. Prince Charles was there. His only interest was in the jazz band that was playing music there. He didn't seem to be much interested in the Commonwealth.

SO: The Queen wasn't there?

VZ: Oh, yes.

SO: I was going to say, you mentioned the Queen Mother, you mentioned Prince Charles. But I was thinking where's the head of the Commonwealth?

VZ: She was there; sorry if I omitted to mention that, but it was just that our attention was on the Queen Mother. All of us knew that the Queen Mother was elderly, hadn't been well, and there was a lot of speculation about her health in the press. And there she was, walking-stick and all, unaided, and there was just something great about that. Malcolm Rifkind was Defence Secretary, and we also went to see him. He gave us the bad news that the Royal Air Force couldn't buy the Rooivalk helicopter essentially because, whatever its merits as a helicopter, it was only useful if fitted with Hellfire missiles. Lockheed Martin, the manufacturer of Hellfire missiles said, "With pleasure you can buy them, but you're not going to stick them on any helicopter but ours. You can fit them to an American helicopter, but not on any other helicopter", and so that was that. We had a separate meeting with Douglas Hurd; at the time I think he was Foreign Secretary -.

SO: Yes.

VZ: - to formerly welcome us back into the Commonwealth. There I saw - I'm sure Douglas Hurd would not want to hear me saying this - but he was much more uncomfortable with Alfred Nzo that he had been with Pik Botha. This was Douglas Hurd out of his depth entirely.

SO: So the personal chemistry that he had had with Pik Botha wasn't there with the new South African Foreign Minister?

VZ: It was there in a polite sort of way, but forced and a bit stiff. It's probably going too far to say that there was a great deal of personal chemistry with Pik, but he had more in common with Pik than with Alfred.

SO: Pik certainly argued that there was!

VZ: - well, fair enough, maybe in Pik's view there was.

SO: I'm just wondering if you would say that that was the case.

VZ: There was certainly more with Malcolm Rifkind, who showed more knowledge and understanding of Africa. Hurd was a different kind of personality. All of a sudden, Alfred Nzo was sitting in front of Douglas Hurd, and Hurd was blinking and not quite knowing what to say.

SO: So were you still Director of the Minister's office at the time of the Auckland summit in '95?

VZ: Yes.

SO: So did you go down there? I know that that CHOGMs are primarily for heads of government, and that Mandela obviously was a particularly important figure at Auckland.

VZ: No. I started withdrawing from the travel schedule around the middle of 1995 because my race was run, so to speak. I'd done my job and I was being appointed ambassador to Poland. I started preparing for my transfer to Warsaw. I was still running the Minister's office, but essentially not travelling anymore. That was an interim period, to enable my successor to start taking over from me. It was a transitional time for me so I didn't go to Auckland for that CHOGM.

SO: Vic, thank you so very much indeed for a long and fascinating interview.

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