



University of London

INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

COHP David McDowell: APPENDIX ONE

Content:

Additional material provided by Mr David McDowell on 10 June 2014. The selection describes a meeting with Nelson Mandela in the mid-1990s when McDowell was Director General of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

'Nelson Mandela: My Other Hero' by David McDowell

In apartheid South Africa the strong conservation NGOs had traditionally been dominated by whites. By the mid-1990s the newly reborn South Africa wanted to strengthen and extend the engagement of blacks as well in the activities of environmental NGOs, especially those with links into global conservation organisations like the IUCN. The objective was to facilitate access for blacks to the many sources of learning and expertise residing in IUCN. I went to Pretoria to help set this up and was astounded to find that I would be dealing with the new President himself, Nelson Mandela, the legendary saviour of South Africa.

He came out of a small office to greet me, quiet and almost diffident. He was taller than I had imagined, but slighter, his greying hair still with traces of black, twinkling eyes and an animated face. He was dressed in a dark three piece suit with a silver grey tie. A gentle handshake like many Africans. Warm and soft-spoken. As gracious, almost courtly, as I had imagined him.

There were few of the trappings of office found elsewhere across the continent in his room. No dramatic carvings of the charismatic African megafauna, elephant or lion or rhino. No line up of expensive gifts from the foreign potentates who had beaten a track to his door. A flag only as I recall. And even that looked a trifle out of place in a room hung with heavy silk curtains and furnished with comfortable armchairs clad in a red rose pattern and modest if elegant polished wood side tables and desk. Of the many African Presidents I had met only the unassuming Julius Nyerere had a smaller office, so tiny that with two large people (Arnold Smith and me) and the diminutive Julius himself there had been little space left for the hundreds of books lining the walls to the ceiling.

Mandela explained to me later with a wry smile why he was occupying these limited quarters in a Presidential residence which looked very substantial as we had swept up the driveway on arrival. I said to President De Klerk when I came into office that he should not feel any pressure to move out of the residence in a hurry, said Mandela. But (chuckle) I did not expect him to be still here many months later! Being Mandela, a most forgiving man, he was not about to send De Klerk on his way yet. A measure of the man.

We talked through the mechanics and funding of setting up a new NGO and came also to a tentative conclusion that planning should start for establishing an IUCN Office in South Africa. Then we walked out of his office onto a wide terrace and he pointed out various points of interest on the Pretoria skyline including the Afrikaners' Voortrekker Monument. He was insistent that I go and see this. It will help you understand where they come from, he said.

We turned towards my car and there were a dozen or more media people, armed with TV cameras, microphones etc., milling about. The President grimaced and then muttered to me: I know what this is about - some of my old comrades, resistance fighters now absorbed into the Defence Force, went on strike this morning. Then he walked over to the media scrum and being a courteous man introduced me to them, explained what the IUCN did and what we had been talking about. He kept being interrupted with cries of "what about the strike Mr. President?" The media were of course not in the least interested in the IUCN nor me, but Mandela finished what he wanted to say about our discussion and then addressed the issue of the day.

He addressed the cameras head-on, spoke directly to the strikers and delivered a very straight message. Comrades, he said, no national defence force can tolerate a strike by one of its units. Your task is to maintain the security of the country. That calls for constant vigilance. There are other ways of settling personal grievances. I say to my comrades in arms that I expect you to return to your barracks immediately. Any one of you who is not back by 6pm this evening will be dismissed from the South African Defence Force.

It was a poignant scene. Mandela looked for the moment both lonely and resolute. It was obviously painful for him to have to speak in this way to colleagues who had risked their lives in the liberation struggle. Leadership is I suppose often both lonely and painful. But he was not speaking only to the resistance veterans. He was saying to all his people, of whatever colour or culture or tribe or persuasion, that the rules of order and law apply in the new South Africa to all citizens with absolutely no exceptions. That was a fundamentally important message.

And Mandela's message got across. The strikers - to a man - were back in the barracks by 6pm and all South Africans heard Mandela's wider message.

What a leader. What courage. What capacity for forgiveness. What a beautiful human being. The most impressive I have met.