A Conversation with Philip Steenkamp

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The consummate, results-oriented professional he was, Philip Steenkamp, never confused an official meeting with a social get-together. That account comes a thousand kilometres away from someone who should know. 'When he was at his desk or at a meeting, he did not allow distractions to creep in, he dealt with the matter at hand and only then, would he allow social discussions. He was thus efficient in terms of time management. He was able to accomplish most tasks, if not all, at the end of the day', says Molosiwa Selepeng, Botswana's High Commissioner to Australia. 'Hard-working' and 'focused' are the other qualities that Selepeng attributes to this Kenyan-born Afrikaner who fetched up in colonial Botswana (Bechuanaland Protectorate) in 1955 as a district officer cadet and became a naturalised citizen 11 years later.

This is how it all happened. Having recently graduated from Natal University with a BA and LLB, Steenkamp got a job in the Bechuanaland Protectorate through the British High Commission in Pretoria. The Steenkamps had been part of a 359-strong community that emigrated to Kenya in 1907 and settled in an area known as the Highlands. Born in 1932, the young Philip did all his pre-varsity schooling in Kenya and was part of the four students in the entire country to do the first A-levels programme.

When he was given a job down here, Steenkamp did not even know where Bechuanaland was –he actually had to look it up in an atlas. All this was happening at a time when there was a brouhaha over Seretse Khama's marriage to Ruth Williams, an Englishwoman he met during his studies in England. This marriage, which Steenkamp got to read about in newspapers, attracted a fair amount of controversy and worldwide media attention.

He was given a year's contract and he still vividly remembers the last sentence of the letter notifying him of this job: 'Your contract is unlikely to be reviewed'. On 14 January 1955, the 23-year old arrived in Mafeking (now Mahikeng), the administrative headquarters of the British colonial government in Botswana and was later posted to Lobatse where he worked for a few weeks before a freak accident propelled him deeper into the Bechuanaland territory.

Around this time, the Francistown district officer was a man called George Winstanley who is now back home in the United Kingdom and recently published his memoirs *Under Two Flags*. Winstanley's autobiography leaves out one very crucial detail about why he had to be transferred out of Francistown to another duty station. Steenkamp's account is that Winstanley was driving his truck when a lady called Barbara de Villiers fell off and died. It really was not Winstanley's fault but a decision was taken by his superiors to transfer him. That was when Steenkamp moved to Francistown.

After two years in Francistown, he was transferred to Mahikeng where he worked as assistant secretary in the colonial secretariat. His main responsibilities were public works and transport. When the farm allocation started in Gantsi in 1958, Steenkamp was on the move again to oversee this exercise. It was in Gantsi that he met Dr George Silberbaeur, the Protectorate's Bushman Survey Officer, the man who, decades later, would return to independent Botswana to guest-star in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve case. Silberbaeur was carrying out research whose findings would be used as evidence at the High Court when the First Peoples of the Kalahari challenged the government's decision to relocate them from the game reserve.

Gantsi was also where Steenkamp met Dingaan Dichaba who would later become an Member of Parliament when the country gained independence. Years later when this pair was working in the Government Enclave, they would have had a lot to reminisce about their Gantsi days. There was a time when both

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men were in Gantsi, that the white farmers petitioned Steenkamp for inviting Dichaba to dinner. The Resident Commissioner of the time was visiting and in addition to the white farmers, Steenkamp had Dichaba on the guest list. 'They got terribly upset', Steenkamp says of the incident.

The colonial government had a rather strange policy that if an officer went on leave, he had to spend the entire period where he was vacationing. Going overseas on a 90-day leave while stationed in Gantsi, Steenkamp had to exercise the right amount of frugality with his 55 pounds a month salary. While on leave, he got word that upon his return he would be posted to Molepolole to work as District Commissioner.

However, when he got back he was instead sent to Lobatse to work as District Commissioner for a few months before he was posted to Francistown. This was a new Francistown that he came back to. During his first assignment he was mostly seized with the infrastructural development of the town but this time around he found himself caught in the nascent and often physical party politics of a nation moving towards independence.

Philip Matante had returned home from South Africa to participate in the political process. 'He had Russian money and was stirring up people', Steenkamp says of his namesake. He adds that in one of the many incidents that he crossed paths with Matante, he had stones thrown at him. 'Philip would stir people up and then disappear when trouble began. He won the Francistown seat in the election but still accused me of rigging the ballot'. A year after independence, Steenkamp moved to Gaborone where he took up the post of Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Home Affairs. Soon, thereafter, he moved again, this time to the Office of the President to fill the newly created post of Administrative Secretary 'and help Archie'. As Permanent Secretary to the President (PSP), Archibald Mogwe, had a cumbersome workload which included a lot of international travel. As Administrative Secretary, Steenkamp attended to internal matters while Mogwe handled external ones.

It was around this time that Selepeng, who had just joined the Office of the President as Assistant Secretary responsible for External Affairs, got to know Steenkamp. One internal matter that Steenkamp attended during this time was a citizen-initiated campaign to establish Botswana's own university. The coordinator of this campaign was Potlako Molefhe who had to take some time off his duties at Radio Botswana to manage the Botswana University Campus Appeal –or BUCA as it was called. Steenkamp facilitated access to President Khama who kick-started the BUCA campaign by donating a herd of 30 cattle. At this particular time, Steenkamp was also in charge of information and broadcasting and supervised Molefhe.

In lamenting about continual meetings, such as we see today, that seem to bear little fruit, Molefhe says that Steenkamp trained his juniors to take decisions and get things done. 'I think that helped a great deal during the BUCA campaign because at the end of our meetings, we would make a resolution', Molefhe says.

In 1974, Mogwe quit the public service to go into politics and Steenkamp was appointed PSP. After a stint in the foreign service, Selepeng was back home and in his new position as the Office of the President, got to work closely with Steenkamp, who, as PSP, served as overall supervisor of the civil service. 'He supervised me directly, from 1980 till he retired. I learnt from him to work hard and efficiently with few resources'.

Steenkamp took up the latter position in an age of turbulence. By necessity, newly independent Botswana had to establish a working relationship with its neighbours, South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), but both were going through a really rough time. Poor though Botswana was, she was very choosy about whom she accepted favours from. 'South Africa was offering us aid but we had to avoid taking it. There was also a war going on in Rhodesia and at one time we had 15 000 refugees in Dukwi and Selebi Phikwe'. Thankfully, Rhodesia would become Zimbabwe and on the day that happened, Steenkamp was

with President Khama in Harare to witness that historic occasion. Unfortunately, for Steenkamp, years later, he would be robbed on Gaborone streets by people from that country when its institutions just began to crumble.

As PSP, Steenkamp had a lot on his plate but he says that the toughest assignment that he ever had to undertake was localising the public service. 'There was a lack of training facilities at the time and qualified people were very few and far between', he says adding that this situation resulted in some officers becoming Permanent Secretaries at a very young age – for example, at 30 years. The localisation of the police force and the setting up of the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) presented their own challenges. 'We also had to walk a tight rope with South Africa. We never knew when the railway would stop running. That worried us because we had no decent north-south road', he says.

As the number one civil servant, Steenkamp worked with President Seretse Khama whom he says he had a very good relationship with. On the downside, the President's illness was a source of great worry to him. The President's medical condition worsened to a stage where he had to wear a pacemaker. Steenkamp still laments Khama's passing away at a 'ridiculously' young age of 59. 'We were friends and I really admired his courage and ability. He was very competent and well-rounded. We are still to see a leader like him. During his time there were never any splits within his party', he recalls of a man whom he says was 'a bit like Mandela'. This is the analogy: Following his marriage to a white woman, Khama was exiled but later returned home to lead his country to independence. Nelson Mandela emerged from prison after 27 years to become South Africa's first democratically government. Both men, Steenkamp notes, managed to put the past behind them and dedicated their lives and service to their respective countries.

Selepeng suggests that by working in Khama's government, Steenkamp became an excellent role model for other white people in the region. That notwithstanding, Steenkamp has misgivings about a public service 'bigger than it should be', a profusion of parastatal organisations and 'endless consultancies'. The term that he uses to describe productivity in the country is 'appalling'. Steenkamp's own impression of his main contribution to the country is that he established a public service that is honest. 'I'm not saying it is competent but it is reasonably honest', he says. The standards of honesty he set were very high. One of the cases that landed on his desk at the time that he was PSP was of a Permanent Secretary who had fiddled with mileage claims. This PS also happened to be Khama's cousin. Khama and Steenkamp discussed the matter and he recalls the President telling him: 'He's not my cousin; he's your civil servant'. This civil servant was tried in court and ended up being sent to jail.

Attending Khama's funeral in Serowe in 1980, Steenkamp met a vibrant young woman from the village called Pelonomi Venson who worked in tribal administration. Venson made so good an impression on Steenkamp that he felt that she deserved a spot on the national platform. It was through such elevation that she ultimately became Permanent Secretary in the then Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing. In the early 1990s, long after Steenkamp had retired from the public service, Venson (now Venson-Moitoi) would stumble and fall but she managed to pick up and dust herself off to not only get a place in parliament but cabinet as well.

Venson-Moitoi's story comes up when Steenkamp is asked whether the public service of his time did enough to empower women. Back when he was PSP, Steenkamp says that there were not many women who had the requisite training to be on par with men. Aside from former cabinet minister Dr Gaositwe Chiepe 'who had always been there from day one', Steenkamp says that there were few else.

It would also appear that there was some resistance from some male chauvinists who frowned upon women joining the big boys club. Steenkamp says that he was criticised by some men for recruiting Venson-Moitoi. Selepeng says that at the time that he worked with Steenkamp, what mattered most was quick delivery of service. Similarly, he remembers that during the BUCA campaign, Steenkamp would expect a report to be ready

the following day. That task fell to Peter Olsen, then a government journalist. Currently, Olsen manages Tsa Badiri Consultancy whose offices are in Gaborone International Finance Park.

'He (Steenkamp) did not tolerate postponement of work. If you made a genuine mistake, he would defend you, as he believed that people who took initiatives also took risks, and had to be rewarded. He thus promoted junior people who showed initiative and worked hard', Selepeng notes. Poor delivery of service is one of the problems that present-day Botswana has to contend with. However, both Steenkamp and Selepeng feel that it would be improper to compare today's administration with yesteryear's. Says Selepeng: 'You should bear in mind that at that time, people were not as demanding as they are today. So, it was easier to satisfy their needs. People tended to be more self-reliant, as they did things for themselves, without expecting as much assistance from government, as is the case today. The volume of work was not as much as it is today: for example, government did not have as many development projects as is the case today. The amount of work and detail of today, far outstrips that of 27 years ago'.

In buttressing the High Commissioner's observation, Steenkamp points out that in his time, Botswana's public service was quite small. Years into retirement he was appointed chairperson of a public salaries review commission, an assignment that required him to crisscross the country eliciting public views on the extent to which the government should be generous towards them. Upon arriving in Masunga, he was 'astounded' to learn that this remote small village had a dental hygienist. He was equally astounded by all the developments (like 'beautiful air-conditioned offices') that he saw in other areas his commission visited. That notwithstanding, Steenkamp has misgivings about a public service 'bigger than it should be'.

Upon leaving the public service, he worked for Shell where he was general manager for 11 years. Colleagues on either side of his term, Mogwe before him and current President Festus Mogae after him, retired into politics but Steenkamp elected the corporate world. Shell was the fourth best-performing company in the country and he says that when he took over the reins, his goal was to make it the best. Though he achieved that goal he was left with a sour taste in the mouth about general productivity in the country. 'Productivity in Botswana is appalling, not just in the civil service but in the private sector as well. To some extent that has to do with the fact that people don't report honestly on those they work with', Steenkamp says.

His experience at Shell –a replication of his civil service –was that an individual would be highly praised but some three weeks later his supervisor would be forced to fire him upon realisation that his performance was woefully lacking. Part of the problem, he adds, is a result of not linking pay to performance and making the false assumption that just because two people may have the same academic qualifications and experience, then they should get the same remuneration.

In addition to its productivity initiatives, the government plans to regulate the liquor trade. The reasoning is that sober workers would be more efficient in clearing their in-trays. While he agrees that alcohol abuse is a problem that necessarily impedes productivity, Steenkamp does not think that prohibition is the way to deal with the problem. He questions why nothing is being done about shebeens which also have substantial patronage.

With his wealth of knowledge and experience, Steenkamp should have traffic officers controlling traffic in and out of his retirement home. That does not happen because by his account, he is 'a great believer in not looking over his shoulder'. What he wants now is to enjoy his retirement. Rarely does he read newspapers or watch TV, he says. However, he reveals that in the past he has held audience with former president Sir Ketumile Masire. He has also served on boards of several companies. That should be well-deserved rest for someone who trained the current and recently retired crop of senior civil servants but his cocoon provides no protection against all the social ills that everyone else has to deal with.

Like everybody else, Steenkamp had high hopes for Zimbabwe when the flag of the new nation replaced the Union Jack, when Robert Mugabe was sworn in as leader and when reggae legend Bob

Marley serenaded the crowd that had turned out for the occasion. It seemed then that from the Great Ruins of Zimbabwe would rise a great nation. Everything was on track until recently when Zimbabwe descended into anarchy. On account of geographic accident, that anarchy spread to Botswana and Steenkamp has experienced it first-hand. Extension Nine seems a peaceful enough place but one day he was out taking a leisurely stroll through the neighbourhood when some Zimbabwean men pounced on him and robbed him of his cellphone and wrist watch.

SADC leaders have decided to adopt quiet diplomacy in dealing with Zimbabwe. Steenkamp thinks that this strategy is misconceived. He notes that when former South African Prime Minister John Voster realised that his Rhodesian counterpart, Ian Smith, was no longer an asset, he withdrew support for the latter's policies and applied pressure. He suggests that South Africa's President, Thabo Mbeki, could do the same thing: withdraw his support for Mugabe and apply pressure to effect change. 'On its own Botswana cannot do anything but join in. Zimbabwe depends on South Africa and not on Botswana', he says.

Taking a walk is not only option that Steenkamp has eliminated from his exercise regimen. In the past, after a long working day, he would end up on the golf course but he can no longer do that because of a back problem. In addition to travelling 'a bit', he also meets his business partner (who lives 'around the corner') once a week to discuss matters pertaining to their investments which include a filling station and property around town.

The Sunday Standard meets him an hour before the weekly business meeting with the partner and towards the end of the interview he keeps glancing at his wrist watch. You still cannot imagine him arriving a second late for his next appointment.

Acknowledgement

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