

Daniel Kwelagobe: A Portrait of a Servant of the People in His Winter

*Botsalo Ntuane**

Isabel and the South African Liberation Struggle

Daniel Kwelagobe's earliest political memory involves his sister Isabel. At the age of 14, she was the subject of police inquiries and close monitoring of her parent's house in Newclare, a township on the western fringes of Johannesburg. Isabel's crime was to travel with her aunt to a gathering that would alter the direction of the struggle against apartheid. In 1953, the Congress Alliance was established. It comprised the African National Congress, the Congress of Democrats, the South Africa Coloured Organisation, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Council of Trade Unions and the Federation of South African Women. All the constituent groups were committed to a society of equals. In 1955, the Congress Alliance organised a conference in Kliptown to draw up the Freedom Charter which made demands for a democratic and non-racial order.

Though a member of the African National Congress, Isabel's mother failed to make it to Kliptown because of the funeral of a close relative. As an activist, she had previously been arrested for being part of a group of women who destroyed their identity cards, known as *dompas*, outside the infamous Pass Office on Albert Street. The family head, who went by the name of Sometimes Kwelagobe, was a card carrying member of the banned Communist Party. He too missed Kliptown because of the funeral. At the end of the conference, the police, armed and on horseback, took down the names of everyone who had been in attendance. The homes of many activists were placed under surveillance. At the Kwelagobe residence, the police made frequent visits looking for Isabel. By then she was a pupil at the Western Township School. Her mother would call her from play and introduce her to the police.

But they were not convinced that a teenage girl could have gone to Kliptown. As far as they were concerned, there was somebody else at the one-roomed house who went by the name of Isabel. Because they could not locate that person, they surmised she had joined the underground resistance. When Daniel Kwelagobe visited from colonial Botswana (Bechuanaland Protectorate), he went straight to the one room house, in which a curtain separated the parents' sleeping area from that of the children.

But even in such conditions of deprivation, which was the lot of the black urban poor, Sometimes and his wife Tlhokomelo were relatively better off. They could live together as a family. That had not always been the case when Sometimes, like many young men from the impoverished Protectorate, first went south to earn a living for his family. Hired by the Native Recruiting Company (NRC), he went as a migrant labourer to work in the gold mines. Like many of his counterparts from all over the sub-region, he lived in the workers compound. Being an enterprising man, Sometimes went to sewing classes and acquired skills as a tailor. He quit the mine and went to live with his brother who having arrived from the Protectorate sometime back, was already established and practising as a traditional doctor in the locality. Not long afterwards, the brother returned to Bechuanaland to continue with his practise and also to work as a blacksmith just like his father. Sometimes took over the house, brought his wife over and was employed as a tailor by a Jewish man in Mayfair.

The Early Years

Back home, Daniel started school at Number One Elementary in Molepolole, which was run by the London Missionary Society. The year was 1950. By his own admission, he was a serial truant and did not take his lessons seriously. He derived more joy spending time in the hills hunting and making mischief with other urchins.

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Not being a regular student retarded his progress. He only got serious at standard one in 1954. His contemporaries at that level were boys such as Legaenyana Matlhabaphiri and Moreri Gabakgore who would become life-long friends.

Englishman Kgobo's Green Chevrolet

After completing Standard Six, Daniel gained a place at Moeding College. By that time he had made his start in politics. Being a free spirited character, he had joined the newly formed Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) at the age of 19 as a result of the efforts of a travelling village pharmacist called Simon Gower. He had arrived to sell his concoctions to Daniel's aunts and, in the process, saw an opportunity to tell them about a new political organisation led by a man called Seretse Khama. The leader of this new party was already the stuff of folk songs in the village.

There was a popular song at the time which chronicled the fallout between Seretse Khama and his uncle Tshekedi Khama over the nephew's decision to marry a white woman. But children were forbidden from singing it. Those found singing the song were not spared the rod for the impertinence of singing about adult issues which were none of their business. Gower was going around the village recruiting people into a party led by the man in the song. The man in the song was apparently promising that he would free the people from the British.

Notwithstanding Gower's enthusiasm, the main man in charge of the fledgling party in the Kweneng area was Englishman Kgabo. His duty was to deliver votes for the 1965 elections which would usher in self-rule. As a full-time organiser, Englishman had a green Chevrolet at his disposal with loud speakers mounted on its roof. In addition to signing up new members, it was his job to conscientise the people about the policies of the new party and its plans were it to win the elections. Daniel, therefore, came under the wing of Englishman. He enjoyed announcing rallies and concert venues as the Chevrolet drove around the district. By virtue of sitting in the cab and speaking over the microphone, Daniel was achieving some small town celebrity status in the village. Englishman was a hard taskmaster. When the van was moving somebody had to be bellowing over the speakers. It was common for the van to drive between the various villages with young Daniel making announcements and singing songs in the middle of nowhere with nary a soul in sight. That is how Englishman wanted it. When the van was moving, the speakers had to be heard.

Political life was no less hectic at Moeding College. The student body aligned itself along BDP, Botswana People's Party (BPP) and Botswana Independence Party (BIP) lines. Added to this potpourri was the anti-apartheid liberation politics of exiled South African students and teachers. At Moeding also were the likes of Moaparenkwe Mpho and Lesedi Mothibamele who were BIP activists. Phandu Skelemani was also part of the student community. In Daniel's recollection, the BDP was the party with the most appeal, and he was at its helm. But over the weekends and whenever he could sneak out, he would go to Molepolole and join up with Englishman in the green Chevrolet. With his skills now honed, he had graduated to become a curtain raiser of Englishman on more complex policy issues.

During this time, the party headquarters was in Kanye, run by Quett Masire as both Secretary General and Editor of the party publication, *Therisanyo*. To this office, Daniel submitted poems and short articles extolling the party. He is not sure if any passed the grade for publication.

The American Experience

After completing Junior Certificate, the next stop was Gaborone Secondary School (GSS). It was a phase in which his interests veered to the politics of the American civil rights movement. Daniel's staple reading and listening was Martin Luther King Jr, Elridge Cleaver and other icons, like Stokely Carmichael. His favourite was also a tape of the 'Great Debate' between Robert Kennedy and Richard Nixon in their race for the White House. All this material he had obtained on an exchange visit to America in early 1966. Back then, the Americans had a scheme called International Farm Youth Exchange Programme wherein

young people from America would go on exchange visits to developing countries with the youth from those places going the other way. In America, they would stay with American farming families and be taught agricultural skills. It was part of the American 4H concept which would provide a model for the 4B programme later introduced in Botswana. As one of only two exchanges from his country, Daniel was in America for six months.

That meant he missed Botswana's independence celebrations on 30 September 1966. He saw a clip of it on television and remembers how the new Botswana flag only unfurled after some struggle. At the end of his sojourn, Daniel returned home to continue with his studies at GSS in a student community that included the people now known as Margaret Nasha and Linah Mohohlo. Upon completion of the Cambridge certificate in 1968, Daniel joined Radio Botswana. The station multi tasked its personnel and Daniel was news reader, reporter and producer, training for which he had acquired in early 1969 on a three months course at the BBC with Margaret Nasha. It was in his role as producer for an interview with President Seretse Khama that marked a turning point in his life. During his time at GSS and when he was not riding in the green Chevrolet with Englishman, Daniel would stroll over to the party office, now relocated to Gaborone. He went there to chat and also volunteer in general duties. The Executive Secretary was a former teacher called Kematlamang Morake.

Involvement in Fulltime Politics

It was during one of his visits that KP, as the Executive Secretary was known, summoned Daniel to his office and informed him that *bagolo* ('elders' or 'leaders') wanted him to give up his job and come into politics fulltime. The party had identified him as a candidate for the Molepolole North constituency to replace Moruti Thobega. Astounded, Daniel recovered sufficiently enough to tell Morake that he had no desire to take up elective political office. He was content as a party member. In any case, his priority was to further his studies. But the matter did not end there. Some months later, Daniel was informed by his mentor Englishman, that the Secretary General and also Vice President Masire wished to see him.

Again the attempt by the leadership to prise Daniel from his job and ambition for more education was rebuffed. The final attempt came when Morake told Daniel that the President wished to see him at State House. He mounted the same defence as he had done with Morake and Masire. But the President asked him to go and think the matter over. It was also intimated that if he joined politics, he would, at a later stage, be granted sabbatical leave to go for further studies abroad. As a result of this undertaking, Daniel agreed and in the elections of October 1969, he defeated George Kgakge. According to him, the victory owed more to the efforts of Englishman Kgabo than anything on his part. Now ensconced in Parliament, the leadership thought that was the end of Daniel's obsession with education. They were mistaken because not long after, he went to see the President with a request to be given sabbatical to go for studies abroad. The reaction of the President was to chuckle and suggest it would be a rather good idea for everyone in the government to go to school and leave the country in the hands of bo-Matante (BPP leaders). President Khama emphasised the primacy of the nation over any personal interest.

Although that put paid to Daniel's ambitions to travel abroad for studies, it did not kill his ambitions to gain more education. He enrolled with the University of South Africa (UNISA) for a correspondence course in economics and law. Daniel recalls that his coaches in economics were Serara Ketlogetswe, later to become Botswana envoy to the United Nations, and Festus Mogae. For the law course, he was assisted by Peter Eigen then at the Attorney General's Chambers, later to found and head Transparency International. Having been elevated to cabinet as Assistant Minister responsible for Information and Broadcasting in the Office of the President, Daniel could not find enough time to complete the courses. A year later, in 1973, he was shifted to Commerce and Industry as a full minister. Another effort to read for an economics degree with the University of Indiana foundered along the way.

BDP Secretary General

In 1974, Daniel Kwelagobe was transferred to a portfolio which would define his political persona in the consciousness of the nation. At a time when Frelimo was on the verge of victory in Mozambique and the MPLA on the march to Luanda, the region was undergoing seismic changes. In Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), the nationalist Patriotic Front made up of ZANU and ZAPU was escalating the liberation war against the regime of Ian Smith. In South Africa, it was the lull before the eruption of June 1976. Into this mix was thrown 31 year old Daniel Kwelagobe as Minister for Public Service, Information and Broadcasting.

Together with Foreign Affairs, headed by Archie Mogwe, these were arguably the two most active portfolios of government. The man who started his career announcing rallies from the cabin of the green Chevrolet was now criss-crossing the country and the region. He accompanied the President to Summits of the Frontline States and interacted with personalities in exile who would later take up leadership of their countries. This was the class of Joshua Nkomo, Oliver Tambo, Emmerson Mnangagwa, Thabo Mbeki and Sam Nujoma, among others. On the domestic front, the areas bordering Rhodesia were in a grip of terror and harassment due to incursions by the Rhodesian army in hot pursuit of Zimbabwe Peoples Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) guerrillas. It was Daniel's job to visit those communities and assure them of the protection of the government. This entailed touring the border areas with the army high command.

It also meant dealing with tragedies like the one of February 1978 when the country suffered its first war dead in an incident where a Rhodesian army unit ambushed a BDF patrol with the loss of 15 lives at Lesoma village in the Chobe Sub-District. By the time he was deployed to the Ministry of Agriculture 10 years later, Zimbabwe was free. The nation had also had to come to terms with the death of its founding President in 1980, Seretse Khama. With Seretse's demise came a change of guard. Masire was elevated to the presidency. That meant he had to relinquish the post of party Secretary General, for which Daniel, then deputy, was asked to hold the fort pending the upcoming congress. It was in 1981 in the mining town of Selebi Phikwe that the party faithful entrusted Daniel with the mandate of Secretary General, a position which for the next 27 years would make his name synonymous with the party.

As the man running the secretariat, he was responsible for ensuring the machinery maintained a competitive edge over its rivals. This involved a lot of travelling in the course of building and consolidating the party structures. As the only truly mass organisation with a national profile, the post of Secretary General requires a person of indefatigable spirit and dedication to the cause. Very few dispute that for many years, no one fitted that mould as well as Daniel. There is no part of the country he has not been to. He has been known to arrive in a small village and ask for obscure party activists by first name. Such is his attachment to the people. In turn, they have found resonance with him. He inspires loyalty and affection from those familiar with his immense sacrifice and devotion to his party. A man of easy manners, humility and simple tastes, he is simply known to democrats as DK, after his initials. A story is told of how in 1992, during his suspension from the organisation he loves, party members from all over the country came to Gaborone to commiserate and demonstrate solidarity during his hour of need.

Mrs Queen Kwelagobe

A key individual in those trying times was his wife. Daniel had first spotted Queen Makgalemele on a sports trip to Shoshong during his Moeding days. The future Mrs Kwelagobe was a local beauty who, among other titles, had won the Miss Tiny Tots contest. She was also the daughter of a businessman and area councillor, Joseph Makgalemele. His daughter left an indelible impression on Daniel.

As the years went by, Queen took to listening to the radio. She fell in love with the voice of the news reader who so happened to be the very man she had seen in Shoshong. When she went to St Josephs College, a courtship began which culminated in marriage in 1973 that resulted in three children Itseng, Opelo and Kagiso.

The Kgabo Report

The episode in which Queen proved to be his emotional mainstay is one which Daniel has sought to bury deep in the recesses of his soul. Its recall still causes him visible hurt. He ascribes the events of 1992 to a doctrine introduced by some party members to aid their ambitions for high office. The chain of events began innocuously enough a year earlier when the then Vice President and also minister responsible for lands, Peter Mmusi, initiated a presidential commission of inquiry to probe improper allocation of land in Mogoditshane and its environs. The Commission was headed by Daniel's old mentor, Englishman, now retired from active politics. When the findings of the Kgabo Commission entered the public domain, the political worlds of both Mmusi and Kwelagobe collapsed around them. In Daniel's case, the Commission determined that he had illegally obtained some land in Nkoyaphiri. Mmusi was implicated for aiding his friend because he had advised the Land Board to negotiate with Kwelagobe for the land in question if it was required for development.

At this juncture, with a feeding frenzy of the media and the opposition parties alleging corruption, he offered his resignation to President Masire. The intention was to then take the government to court in order to clear his name. But the President did not accept the resignation and asked Daniel to sleep over the matter. At a cabinet meeting to consider the report, both men recused themselves. In rapid succession, a White Paper was published which made a recommendation for Daniel to hand back the piece of land at issue. Convinced he had done everything above board in transacting the sale with the previous owner, he refused. This time the President accepted the resignations of both Kwelagobe and Mmusi. They made clear their intention to fight the matter in court.

Suspension from Party Positions

With the scene set for a confrontation, Daniel received a call from the President whilst on party business in Maun. Because of their stated intention to sue the government, the Central Committee had slapped them with indefinite suspension. In his phone call, the President instructed him to return the party vehicle in his possession. The basis for the suspension was the impending court action. In the words of the President, the party and the government were two sides of the same coin. Daniel is convinced up to this day that the Kgabo Commission was hijacked by some members who wished to gain control of the party. The north-south doctrine was the ideal instrument for the conspirators.

They whispered that an imbalance in which the President, Chairman and Secretary General all originated from the southern part of the country had to be corrected. In implicating the Chairman and Secretary General through the findings of the commission, the intention was to replace them with individuals from the north who subscribed to the doctrine. On being asked if his mentor Englishman could have been part of the conspiracy, Daniel opines that the proceedings were hijacked and the old man was not part of the cabinet meeting which drew up the recommendations of the White Paper.

Factions and Rehabilitation

Fighting the government in court on one corner and cast out in the cold by his party, lesser men would have returned to their village. With the battle lines drawn, supporters of the decision to suspend the two men were constituted into what the press named the Big Five faction with the Mmusi/Kwelagobe supporters referred to as the Big Two. High noon came in Kanye on the occasion of the 24th party congress. While still on suspension, the duo fought for their reinstatement through their network of supporters in the party. Their assumption was that their term of suspension would expire with the life of the Central Committee to which they had been elected. This would enable them to run contest for their positions.

But the counter view was that for as long as their case was in court they remained suspended. For the first time in its history, the Botswana Democratic Party was split along antagonistic factions prepared

to fight to the death for control of the party. There is an account of how, after the President delivered the opening speech announcing that Mmusi and Kwelagobe were entitled to contest the elections because their suspension had expired, he proceeded to deliver another speech the following morning tracing the genesis of the Kgabo Commission and its findings. To their supporters, this amounted to a strategy to decampaign Mmusi and Kwelagobe. The latter absolves Masire of any malicious intent. In his view, the second speech had been thrust on the president by those seeking to jeopardise their electoral prospects. On the Kgabo Report, the court nullified the entire process. Kwelagobe had won the battle to clear his name. The experience of Kanye and the events preceding it had planted the seeds of intense enmity between democrats.

History records that the congress emphatically re-elected both men to their positions of party Chairman and Secretary General respectively. Kwelagobe returned to lead the campaign for the general election campaign of 1994 while Mmusi, who was not well, passed away just before the polls. In the elections, the opposition Botswana National Front took advantage of the disarray in the BDP and shot from a marginal party to the political mainstream by registering 13 seats. Before the split of the BNF in Palapye in 1998, the party represented a clear and present threat to the hegemony of the ruling party. With the Mmusi/Kwelagobe saga the party had now entered a phase in which factional rivalry in its different manifestations became a hall mark of BDP politics.

Peacemaker

In less than a year, the country will have a new president, its fourth since independence. Ian Khama will inherit a party much more stable than was the case when his predecessor assumed power. In fact, it were for the bitter divisions that Festus Mogae decided in 1998 to look for somebody outside the party as his deputy. The prevailing climate of calm in the BDP is in stark contrast to the period following the 2004 general elections when the factions engaged in another bout of seasonal blood letting.

In what some attribute to factional politics, he did not return to cabinet following those elections. But with the factions threatening to tear the party asunder, and a confident opposition cooperating to win some BDP wards in by-elections, Daniel had a one-on-one summit with party chairman Ian Khama. The outcome was two retreats in Tlokweng at which a road map for peace and reconciliation was formulated. As part of the rapprochement, Kwelagobe together with Ponatshego Kedikilwe and Utlwang Matlhabaphiri were brought into the cabinet. Daniel has now turned his efforts to forging durable unity in the BDP. The state of tranquillity ahead of the 32nd party congress is a dividend of those efforts.

Returning to the Village of the Green van

A humble man whose labour of love is his party, Daniel has a poignant story from years ago. He once called his children for a sit-down. He told them that in life everyone chooses their destiny. As their father his destiny in life was to work for the party and the nation. He also told and counselled them that in serving the people, he sought no material wealth in compensation, hence his modest means despite years of toil for the party and the nation. Now, how apt that in the year of the winter when he hands over the baton to somebody else, DK will be doing so in his home village, where, in the green van all those years ago, he embarked on a journey that would turn him into a political giant of modern Botswana.

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