

INTERVIEWEE: Koos Van Der Merwe

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INTRODUCTION: I am Koos Van Der Merwe, I'm a member of the South African Parliament since 30<sup>th</sup> November 1977, which means that I am today the longest serving member of the South African Parliament. I'm also a practicing lawyer and I am a businessman and I'm studying for a doctorate in Political Science and my theme is around apartheid.

A: When I was elected to parliament, we had the greatest respect for Mr Vorster. Even when he approached us, us backbenchers would stand quietly, let him pass and bow to him. Even just the fact that he was present made you feel awesome; "Here is John Vorster, the Prime Minister."

A ...I just had the impression that during his tenure, not much happened in respect to the policy of separate development. I think that is how we will remember him, is that during his period he didn't really aggressively market it, or gave substance, to the policy of separate development. He didn't do much about that policy.

Q: What about his policies that he implemented as Minister of Justice, do you think that those had more of an impact than his time as Prime Minister?

A: Yes, that was more definite and concrete. He took steps against what he regarded as enemies of the country. He took decisive steps, that was very, very much so. That stands in sharp contrast with the absence of the definite steps that he did not take in respect of the concretisation of the policy of separate development. He was very firm on security, he did things, he passed laws but he didn't have that definite purpose in life when it came to separate development.

Q: Was there ever mention in NP circles of Vorster's own time as a political detainee in the Koffiefontein camp?

A: No not much. We sometimes discussed that in lighter vein but it wasn't an issue.

Q: Nobody saw it as strange that John Vorster Square, as it was then, was a building named after a serving minister. Did that strike anyone as strange?

A: Not at the time but with the advantage of hindsight, it was obviously a mistake. One shouldn't do that. The naming, the naming issue which is very hot now, I didn't think one should do that because you also had the Albert Herzog TV tower. Now when anybody proposes that something be named after an existing minister or prime minister, nobody will object to that because you may get the current against you. Maybe it's said that, "He is against the minister," so if one person proposes, "Let's call this John Vorster Square," nobody would object to this for fear of action against you, to fall out of favour. But it was wrong to have done that. Not aimed at Mr Vorster but at the practice of giving names to living people.

Q: Do you think that Vorster was more of a politician of the sixties than of the later period?

A: I don't know but I would debate that with you. I've got a clipping from a newspaper in the Vaal Triangle of 1976 in which Ian Smith, the then prime minister of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, said he spoke to Mr Vorster after he had returned from Vienna to meet American politicians and Vorster then said, "Apartheid is dead and buried." Now, I'm busy with a doctorate at the moment about apartheid and that is very interesting because what did Mr Vorster mean by saying apartheid is dead and buried in 76 while in 77 when I was elected a member of parliament, he fearfully fought for and stood for, separate development. Now did he still believe in it or had he come to the conclusion in 76 that the policy will not work? But he proceeded with it the next year until he retired. What does that mean? I've got to unpack that, if Mr Vorster then, lost faith in the policy of separate development, why did he continue with it? I ask this question because I have a letter from advocate Seel (sp?) Pienaar who was a member of parliament who writes to me, saying that he was told before 76 that Mr Vorster

had told some Afrikaner people in Durban, when they asked him, "What is the future of the Afrikaner people?" Mr Vorster allegedly said, "We will be lucky if we retain something like the Coloured Representative Council,"...the Afrikaner would be fortunate if he retained something like a non-significant council. Now, taking into account these things that Mr Vorster said, the question that I am posing to myself is, why did he then continue with the policy of separate development, if he had lost faith, why continue? Now I have discussed this with some of my colleagues who served with Mr Vorster and some say that there was no alternative; there was not a strong opposition, there was the PFP at the time with half a dozen members, you couldn't pass the ball to an opposition party because there wasn't one. The other difficulty was, the other obstacle, was that if you now make the changes that are needed, if Vorster went to the electorate saying, "I've come to the conclusion that our policy will not work, we have to find a new constitutional model to protect the interests of *inter alia*, the Afrikaner people," had he done that, the possibility's realistic that Jaap Marais' HNP would have taken over the government. So maybe there was no alternative but then why just continue? This is a question that I'm battling with in my doctorate namely, if Afrikaner leaders had lost faith in the policy why did they continue with it because there's clear evidence that Vorster had lost faith in apartheid.

Q: How do you think the NP felt about Vorster's response to June '76?

A: They agreed with him. The National Party supported Vorster very strongly.

Q: So he was the leader and they followed him?

A: Yes, agreed with him, supported him, thought that was the right thing to do.

Q: Was there any dissent in the ranks regarding Vorster's outward looking foreign policy which was much different to his internal policy at the time?

A: I don't know if it's much different. The thing is that he obviously knew that South Africa is not an island on its own, you live in a world and that it was necessary to build relationships with other countries who are not white: who are Chinese, who are black, who are Indian. I think he realised it and he wanted to cultivate relationships with African countries and as far as I remember there wasn't an uproar about that.

Q: In the end, how do you think that Vorster should be remembered? How do you think that history will remember Vorster?

A: I think history will remember him as a good Afrikaner, as a lawyer type of person, a person who was firm in respect of security but who was not firm in respect of the policy, maybe he had lost faith in the policy, maybe that is why he was not strong on it. He will be remembered as an excellent humourist. I remember the one year that I sat in his caucus; he hardly let a caucus go by without telling us a 'story' as he called it, a good joke. He was an excellent humourist. Strong, we respected him but in respect of the main challenge namely the challenge for a new constitutional model or the challenge of accommodating the other peoples in South Africa he didn't do much. He will be remembered as one who marked time.

Q: You also served under P.W. Botha who was Vorster's successor. How do you think Vorster was different to Botha?

A: Vorster was a lawyer; he was much more intelligent than Botha. He was a different person. Botha was a party organiser, he didn't have a university schooling, he didn't study at university, not that that is so important. He was basically a party organiser, he could organise. He didn't have answers for the problems. I want to make bold to say that he didn't understand the real issues, the approaching Black tsunami, Botha didn't understand that. I went to see him a few years ago in Die Wilderness and I spoke to him and asked him, "Now, Mr Botha, what went wrong? We White people, Afrikaners, were in control. We had the strongest defence force in Africa, we had access to all the funds, all the power, everything. Why did we lose this?" I was expecting him to say that it was because we had the wrong constitutional model, we had to find a different one to accommodate all the people of South Africa, in one

undivided South Africa but he didn't give me that answer. What he told me, Mr Botha, P.W., is that he fell ill. The reason that all this happened, in other words, is because Mr Botha fell ill and he eventually retired so he couldn't do anything about it. His successors in other words, were weak, they couldn't do it. So he never saw the approaching tsunami. He thought he could hold out and I had the distinct impression when I left Die Wilderness that he didn't understand the approaching black tsunami.

Q: Do you think there was a difference between Vorster as a police man and Botha a military man?

A: No, Vorster was not really a police man. Vorster was a lawyer and a politician. Good all round politician. Botha also was not really a soldier but he managed the defence force. Now, I knew the defence force very well because I served in the Citizen's Force for fifteen years, I passed numerous courses and camps, I attained the rank of a major and a unit commander so people like myself knew much more about the internal workings of the defence force than Mr Botha. He came in on top, he wasn't a soldier, he was an administrator, an organiser that ran it but he did it very well, he did it thoroughly. Was an excellent administrator, an organiser, party organiser.

Q: But do you think that there was a shift in terms of security policy under Botha where intelligence and those kind of activities began to be handled more by the military?

A: You know in various countries you have the situation where the security arms are opposing one another. The CIA and the FBI and other organisations in America are not always doing the same work, they are opposing one another. In South Africa you had a situation where you had the police who had their intelligence, the defence force had theirs and then you had Neil Barnard also with the intelligence and there was a lot of jealousy amongst them, they didn't co-operate properly. They should have become one national intelligence. So under Botha there was more disruption and confusion in respect of that than under Vorster. Vorster had Hendrik van den Bergh, 'Lang' Hendrik and they had a firm grip on everything.

Q: What was 'Lang' Hendrik's reputation within the party?

A: Lang Hendrik was seen as an equally strong person supporting Vorster and making sure that the security of the country is properly cared for. He had a good operation. He never interfered, he never allowed himself to be involved in party politics while he was there. After the split in 1982, Lang Hendrik joined the Conservative Party, of which I was a member, and he served with us for a while. I remember the incident in Johannesburg, what year was this I can't remember, when David Protter seized the Israeli Consulate close to the Carleton Hotel in Johannesburg, killed somebody and held some hostages. I was involved there that night; I played a very important role there that night to get the children released. But Lang Hendrik arrived there and there were numerous people, Jimmy Kruger was there, the Minister of Justice, the general of the police was there, Geldenhuys, all the big brass was there and Lang Hendrik came there and he just took control. I will never forget this, he had discussions with David Protter right through the night, I listened to it, we all sat there and he tired out David Protter until he surrendered the next morning. He was magnificent Lang Hendrik and he just overshadowed all the other policemen there, all the generals and so on.

Q: Were there any doubts or objections within the NP about the issue of detention without trial?

16:22 – A: Not much. At the time, we were under the impression that the security challenge was tremendous. The Communists were going to try to take over the country and then it would be chaos and we had to prevent that. So there was a uniformity of mind at the time amongst us.

Q: Did John Vorster Square represent anything in particular?

A: No not really. It was just another police station.

Q: How do you think that the history of John Vorster Square should be commemorated if at all?

A: I don't think it's anything special. It's just a police station. There are a few hundred others. I don't see any special significance in John Vorster Square; it's just a police station.

Q: Is there a specific story that you can remember about John Vorster that might encapsulate something of his character for you?

A: Well Vorster was a humourist. One day Devilliers Graaf, when Vorster was speaking, said to Vorster, "You are a bad prophet." Vorster immediately attacked him saying, "Did you hear that Mr Speaker? The honourable leader of the opposition says that *I* am a bad prophet but who is the bad prophet? It's *him*. In 1948, he prophesised that the old SAP regering would win. He was wrong. In 1953 he said they will win. He was wrong. In 1959, he prophesised this. He was wrong," and he came on until now. He said, "In fact Mr Speaker, he blames me for being a bad prophet but he is such a bad prophet that if today, he says to me, 'John, you look sick,' then I know Mr Speaker, my chances for a second life has never been better."

**END OF INTERVIEW**

