

# 'Mr Clean'

## Military Intelligence expert **in from the cold**

Pierre Steyn speaks to SHIREEN BADAT and GEOFF BROWN about his new position as defence secretary.



**T**WO years ago Pierre Steyn was given the task of investigating "dirty tricks" in Military Intelligence. In his new post as defence secretary, he will have to persuade those reared on the *kragdadigheid* of the old defence force that the time has come for democratic relations between the force and civilians.

Steyn has cut short his early retirement to take up the new post which has been created by the government and is seen by observers as an essential step in asserting civilian control of the ministry of defence. Steyn's new duties include being principal policy adviser to the minister of defence, controlling the financial accounting of the department of defence and providing a civilian balance to military issues.

He is confident of fulfilling his obligations. "I believe that the defence force as a whole has no problem with the establishment of this new structure," says Steyn.

"However, there are individuals who fear for their positions. Many of the powers vested previously with the defence force chief have been transferred and in setting up the structure and having to populate it with 450 staff, some people fear they might be left out in the cold.

"The necessary co-operation required is forthcoming and will continue, provided that the pace does not quicken. I believe that we can effect changes by the end of the financial year."

Steyn brings to the job 34 years of experience in the military. Trained as a pilot in 1960, he rose through a succession of appointments which included chief of staff operations in both the air force and the defence force.

Tipped by experts to become chief of the old South African Defence Force (SADF), his premature retirement at the end of 1993 surprised many. He had earned the respect of both the SADF and former enemies in Umkhonto we Sizwe and was known as "an officer and a gentleman".

"A new breed of personnel, not soldiers," are the people Steyn is looking for to staff the defence secretariat. He says the unit's

organisation will have to reflect the roles and functions given to it by the Constitution, primarily to act as the interface between the citizenry and defence delivery.

"We have to respond at the highest level to formulate policy for military defence, solicit resources from parliament in order to meet the demands of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), and effect mechanisms over the control of money. We need to translate the social needs of people who serve in the part-time forces. In order to do all this, we need to employ specialists."

Steyn believes that the defence force will have to rely significantly on part-time forces, which means tapping the human resources of the private sector. "There is furious debate on the impact this will have on the private sector. I believe that we have to institute some kind of body or forum to debate this impact."

He also sees it as his job to attract business investment in the SANDF but appreciates that such an enterprise will be evaluated on the basis of potential returns. "It is one thing for parliament to decide on an issue and another for business to take risks," he says.

Steyn feels that it is unfair to expect the defence force to assume responsibility for demobilisation. "A programme similar to those instituted after World War II and the Korean War needs to be instituted. Whether the conflicts which occurred during the apartheid years are seen as war is another issue, but people on both sides were affected."

He believes that another ministry should look at the welfare of veterans because "the ministry of defence only knows one thing and that is how to handle a rifle". There should be liaison between this ministry and defence "but a ministry other than defence would assume responsibility in a more objective way".

As regards South Africa's continued arms trade with other countries, he supports an arms industry run along business lines but feels that a code of conduct should be drafted. Without an arms industry the country would need to import arms in times of war. "We will not be able to blame other countries for selling to us - how can you argue to the

contrary in our case?"

Asked what South Africa's response should be to foreign requests for military aid, especially with regard to the Haitian situation, Steyn replies: "The answer to this question lies in foreign policy not defence policy. Defence policy is an aggregate of other policies. If you consider that foreign policy acknowledges membership of bodies like the Organisation of African Unity and the Southern African Development Community, we have to exercise our responsibility and international social conscience."

However, he adds that South Africa has demonstrated to the world that the most terrible conflict can be resolved in a peaceful manner. "I will support the application of force only once all other measures have been exhausted. Haiti can be isolated in order to effect changes. I believe that the use of force at this stage is not appropriate."

On the issue of the military participating in non-partisan civil liberties education, Steyn says, "I believe that a soldier, being a citizen in uniform, should be afforded the same rights as other citizens. Conditions of discipline inhibit individuals in the military but I still believe that soldiers should receive such education."

He is more conservative on the question of whether soldiers have the right to strike. "I cannot imagine a soldier laying down his gun. Soldiers should be taught this within the confines of their duties," he says.

Asked for his thoughts about the imminent Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he says: "It reminds me of a bomb with a very short fuse. While the fuse burns shorter you think you are in control. Once it ignites, you lose all control over it. I am confident of the future. I am not saying that we must not correct the past. But the architects must be skilled enough to make a difference. I am concerned but I am not saying that it cannot be done."

Finally, we asked *the* question. Could we have a copy of the Steyn Commission report? He smiles, shrugs his shoulders and - like all the others before us to ask this question - we leave empty-handed. ■