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**Interview with Ben Turok  
By Carilee Osborne**

**South Africa has just gone through its 6<sup>th</sup> democratic election. What are your overall impressions of how that has played itself out?**

Well I was on the whole quite pleased that the ANC managed to maintain a substantial vote. Of course, there was a substantial abstention. That is something we all expected- there is no doubt that there is a lot of disenchantment with the ANC. However, people still appear to have loyalty to the ANC. I am talking about the masses. I am not so concerned with marginal groups and when they rise or don't rise. A great deal of attention has been given to the Freedom Front for example. I think those are marginal issues. The main issue is what do the mass of our people think and they voted for the ANC despite all the issues. The ANC does still speak to the people.

**A lot has been made in the media about the growth of the EFF and the fact that they will now hold 44 seats in parliament. What do you make of their performance?**

Well they are a very dynamic group and they are actually very visible and very good politicians in a way. However, they are clearly populists without a real programme. We don't really know what they stand for. Like all populist parties all over the world, they sloganize a great deal and articulate what they think are popular policies which attract young people and the masses and they succeeded in doing that. And the ANC has been rather flat-footed, rather tired frankly. The ANC is a tired organisation and many people have been there a long time and have lost energy. People can sense that. The EFF is young and dynamic. They wear their berets and have all the paraphernalia and so I think they are targeting and triggering a sort of gut reaction among young people. This is very dangerous because the EFF are irresponsible and they don't articulate a serious policy. For instance, now- absolutely surprisingly- they support the public protector. Everyone else is against the public protector who is obviously as incompetent as anything and breaking the law with every judgment she makes but the EFF stands behind her because she is prosecuting Pravin Gordhan.

That is how the EFF works. They work on current affairs, on immediate issues, on populism. Also, one has to say that there is a strong suspicion of corruption with the VBS bank scandal in particular. They are denying everything of course but the connections look very suspicious. They are doing what the ANC did but with less credible organisations, a bank going bankrupt. Of course, the ANC gets money through these kinds of networks. The ANC has gotten a lot of money from people trying to curry favour with them. The case of the mayor in Durban right now is indicative of this. From my personal knowledge it appears that she has been running something of a parallel state and that is corrupt to the benefit of the ANC. The tenders are designed to benefit the ANC. When you have this, the word gets out and you lose a lot of credibility.

**I'd like us to talk, as we move forward from elections, about parliament which often doesn't get the attention it should. You spent 20 years as an MP. What are your overall thoughts about that time?**

Well I have been brooding on this a lot lately. It is a very mixed experience. On the one hand you feel very honoured to be in the South African democratic parliament and it gives you a very nice feeling, especially in the days of Mandela and even Mbeki. One shouldn't underplay that, pride in one's country and in the ruling party at the time. Of course, things went rather differently under Zuma when one became rather disgusted being part of a machine which was really not taking any action against a corrupt president. I must say that we didn't know just how corrupt he was. I am interested to see that even a person like Dennis Davis, in his recent book *Lawfare*, admits that he- as a judge and as a professor- was not really aware of the scale of corruption under Zuma. Zuma was very clever and careful in many ways. Although we knew something was wrong, you couldn't always identify where and how. You knew some appointments were bad- Brian Molefe for example- but you couldn't always say *why* it was wrong.

To get back to your question, as an MP you do have access to an enormous amount of information. You get the budget, you get the annual reports of all the departments, the Auditor General reports. If you have time to read, you have an enormous amount of material. It is a matter of time and of diligence. So, you are sitting in the middle of a vortex of paper and you can often only skim these documents. And you have a lot of responsibilities and obligations within a highly bureaucratized system.

Let's start with the ANC caucus where you meet every week at a set time chaired by the chair of caucus with the chief whip. Here you run through the legislation that is coming and ministers will report on their legislation. They will often present you with supporting documents that aren't public. So you really get an inside picture of why the ANC is taking certain positions on certain issues. Of course, you also get the president or the secretary general addressing caucus and laying down the political line. It is made very clear to you that you are there at the bequest of Luthuli House. It is made very clear that you can think what you like personally but, in parliament, you are there as the party and there is a line and that creates many problems. I think back to the time of [AIDS denialism](#) and the many people in caucus who had reservations about Mbeki's position. What these people did is went to the chief whip and said that they couldn't support this. What the Chief Whip would say is that they could "play sick" that day. But, by and large, there is a line and this is what you obey. Similarly, in your ANC study groups, you will discuss a piece of legislation as an in-house group, as the ANC.

**Could you tell me about the work of the committees? How important are they?**

The multi-party portfolio committees are really where the work happens. On the whole they are very co-operative. You get tensions and some disagreements but it is not difficult to get an agreement. The parties will usually compromise in the end. From there, the decisions are drawn up by the officials and sent through the speaker and a debate is arranged, the legislation tabled etc. The curious thing I always say is that some very helpful opposition

people in the portfolio committee will come into plenary and be your biggest enemy. There is often real confrontation because the cameras are on so people are playing to the TV. This is very different to the working group in the portfolio committee and it creates a lot of problems.

**There was a lot of controversy around your role in the Ethics Committee. Could you tell me about that experience?**

I was very fortunate to chair the ethics committee. However, when I was first appointed, I thought, “oh my god this is some sort of backwater.” In fact, the Secretary General called me, Gwede Mantashe and Kgalema Motlanthe, called me to Joburg and said they wanted me to be head of the Ethics Committee and I wasn’t happy because of that. I thought it was a backwater. But that is what they had for me and so I agreed. At the first meeting of the committee, I asked what the agenda was, and I was told that our job was to monitor the financial interests of members. Members fill in a form, officials compile a report from the forms and if there are any questions, they call in the member for questioning. And I felt this was a very unsatisfactory approach so I phoned Frene Ginwala, the former speaker. And I asked her, “When you adopted the constitution and the parliamentary role, did you have a philosophical position?” And she said no.

I felt that you couldn’t have an Ethics Committee without a political philosophy. This is not just box ticking where you say, “I received this and I didn’t receive that”. It is about the integrity of an individual. I phoned the House of Commons and I asked them what their philosophical underpinnings were and they sent me a couple of documents. But I have to say I wasn’t impressed. So, I wrote a paper for the committee. My co-chair thought I was crazy, but I didn’t want to be there if we didn’t have an understanding of the foundations of what we wanted to do. Case law is not enough. We have to interpret the rules. This requires ethical judgement. You can’t just depend on precedent. My paper was then adopted and thank goodness because, thereafter, we began to exercise ethical judgements and became a lot more sophisticated.

It was soon after, for example, that we began to investigate Dina Pule. I don’t know if you remember the story of the red shoes? Well here is a minister who goes to Europe and gets herself a pair of extremely expensive shoes and the [Sunday Times](#) prints this on the front page. Immediately my hackles were raised. I thought this was out of order and we needed to investigate. We found that she was involved in corrupt practices with certain companies. She was organising a big exhibition in Cape Town and a lot of money had been allocated to that. There was a genuine exhibition company who had been marginalised for a number of reasons who had lost a huge amount of money because the money was going somewhere else. When we enquired about where it was going, [a boyfriend](#) of Dina Pule emerged and the plot began to thicken. I contacted the police. We got hold of the public servants in her department and we subpoenaed them to tell us how the contracts were drawn up. We went into great detail and had to piece together many small bits of evidence that we felt was very compelling.

The parliamentary code of conduct makes provision for a parliamentary court of sorts. The ethics committee appoints nine members to set up a court. I chaired that. We summoned

Dina Pule. She was very angry, very resentful that she was a minister and had been summoned here to us.

In this process you are allowed to be defended by another member of parliament, preferably a lawyer. Mike Masutha was her lawyer, the later Minister of Justice. I was furious with him. I felt he had conducted a Stalingrad defence. It was a tricky exercise but we finally found her guilty. I went to the chief whip with the evidence. The rules require that we now report to the house as the committee had no powers of its own. We couldn't dismiss anybody because the House has to make that decision. She was a member of the House and he said no. So, I had a fight with him. He said that the order paper was too full and it was the end of term etc. I emphasised to him that this was critical and that we had been working very hard on this.

By the way during, this I was summoned by the political committee of the ANC chaired by Kgalema Motlanthe which consisted of him, ministers, the chief whip etc. I had to explain what this was all about and the procedures we had followed, and they said go ahead. Then I was summoned by the ANC whips. It was a very controversial and heated moment. They said, "Why are you attacking an African woman?" It was a very stormy meeting. They didn't say "white man" and all that, but it was there. I was facing the music. They had a go at me. I had to explain that the code of conduct dictated this. Finally, they let it pass.

After a lot of manoeuvring, I got it on the order paper and I presented a [speech](#) to the house. I said she was guilty of an offence and the House must take the necessary steps. [She was there](#). As she left the chamber, a whole lot of women hugged her and kissed her and really made me feel as if I was the enemy. So, she had a lot of support. People didn't like this, but we stood our ground and ultimately [she was sanctioned](#).

I received death threats through all of this. I had to have parliamentary security protection. They wouldn't allow me to drive myself. They had to fetch and carry me. We had to go a different route every day. I had to have alarms put in the house. For a month or more, I didn't drive at all. They had to sit outside my office. The witnesses also had similar security.

**It seems that while some of the structures existed to allow you to do this, what it really required was someone having the political will to take this forward. Do you think that is a fair characterisation?**

Absolutely. After I left, the Ethics Committee was given to Amos Masondo, the new chair of the NCOP. I have known him for years and he is a tame person. So, he called me up once I had left parliament saying he was the new chair of ethics and wanted me to come and tell him what was up and so I spent a few hours talking about it, taking them through the code of ethics. I kept tabs on them a little bit while I was outside, and they were so lethargic. You never read about the ethics committee in the press anymore. When we were there, my god! We were in the newspapers every second day. It was headline news. You can imagine. So, you are quite right, you can have all the rules you like but if the people aren't willing to stick their necks out it won't work.

**Do you think this also has to do with the influence of Luthuli House over parliament? Would you characterise Parliament as having a lack of independence *vis a vis* Luthuli House?**

Oh sure, parliament is not independent. The ANC in parliament is not independent. True at times it exercises certain autonomy and at times it goes into rebellion. It does. It did on AIDS. And for instance, if I may talk about myself. You know the Secrecy Bill. My neighbour in parliament was Llewellyn Landers who was the chair of the ad-hoc committee considering the Bill. We used to chat a lot and he gave me drafts as they were coming. The ad-hoc committee sat for a year and the opposition was violent. The DA was vehemently against it. The Presidency and Luthuli House wanted this legislation but it was very draconian. You have never seen anything like it. It was really Gestapo stuff. Everything would be monitored. You can't believe it. East German stuff, the way you create control.

And I was given all these documents because I was interested. It wasn't really my business but I was curious. So, I was very well-informed. There was then a crisis in the committee but finally with a lot of messing around and many meetings, it became a Bill. I couldn't believe it.

So, there I was and the Bill is coming to parliament and I have to vote. So, I phoned up Albie Sachs and I asked him, is it constitutional? And he said no way. I phoned Geoff Budlender and asked him. He said it is very bad law and it is not constitutional. I was at home discussing this with my wife, Mary, and I didn't know what to do. I left home on the day of the vote and I still wasn't sure. And I was driving to parliament. I remember exactly where I was when I made the decision. I was on the M3 approaching Bishops Court and I was driving and I thought, I can't do it.

I went to Parliament and the House was sitting at 2 o'clock as usual and the DA moved a number of amendments to delay the bill. These were all voted down. I voted them down because the amendments were not fundamental. And then came the main motion. So, I wrote a note to the Chief Whip and I said, "I don't agree with this, I am leaving." I was sitting near the back. I sent the note with the messenger to the Chief Whip and I saw that he had received it and looked quite shaken up. I slipped out. I thought nobody saw me but the gallery did. Within 10 minutes of leaving, my phone was ringing and the whole media were onto me. My phone did not stop ringing. I was going to Bloemfontein that afternoon to give a lecture at the African Institute and the media were going crazy. I gave my lecture that evening and still the phone continued to ring.

A week or two later- and I think this is very important- I got a document from Luthuli House and it was a charge sheet. It read exactly like a police charge sheet that begins with "you are accused etc etc." and what I was accused of was "counter revolution". That was the exact phrase used. Wow I was angry. I was furious. I thought I was acting on principle and they called me a counter-revolutionary? Because I voted against that bloody thing? So, I was fuming as you could imagine. This leaked to the press and Pallo [Jordan] called me and said, "Benny-he calls me Benny- don't resign. Don't resign." I felt that I ought to do it and he said don't and that he would defend me. I felt that that changed the picture a little bit.

Luthuli House sent down an official with the indictment and we had a hearing. Pallo came to the meeting and there were a few people there including the Chief Whip. They read the indictment to me and Pallo spoke. And he was brilliant. I will never forget how good he was. This guy is really very clever, and he emphasised that this was a matter of principle. This was an ethical statement. He took a stand on an ethical issue. Surely as a movement, we have to differentiate between that and counter-revolution. He was brilliant. I wish I had recorded it.

These guys were taken aback because Pallo is a big man with a serious reputation. We adjourned the meeting. Then a few weeks later there was an ANC meeting somewhere in Joburg that I attended and Gwede Mantashe was standing outside of that particular room and I went up to him and confronted him. I was furious. I told him, "I will never forgive you for calling me a counter-revolutionary. With my record. Really." I went for him. He was totally taken aback. Luthuli House, forwarded the case to the formal disciplinary committee chaired by Derek Hanekom. Hanekom then spoke to me privately and said, we aren't happy with this, with what you have done. You see what they did is that they did their research. They got copies [of all the interviews](#) I did with the media that day and shortly after where I had explained why I did this. So Hanekom said to me that it was clear that I wasn't recalcitrant. You were not sorry about what you did. You defended it. How dare you! So, I said, well I stand by what I did. The weeks went by and then one day Derek just said to me, this won't fly, and they quietly let it go. And that's the ANC.

**In those two examples, you have shown us some of the problems that exist in the system. Do you think there are things we can do: mechanisms, reforms etc that would help to make the system less dependent on the role of individuals standing up?**

Yes and No. The trouble is that MPs are appointed by Luthuli House. There is a list committee. I was on this for two conferences, so I know well how it works. The List Committee decides who goes to parliament and who doesn't and there is a certain amount of jockeying. They say it is all democratic and it is for the most part, but there is room for manipulation. For instance, when I was on the committee, I looked at the list and people like Rob Davies and Yunus Carrim were way down because the branches hadn't voted for them because they weren't popular at the grassroots. I sent a note to Gwede Mantashe as the chair and I said to him if you go to parliament with this, there will be trouble. You better put them in. And they were put in. So, there is room for adjustment and that is sensible. You can't be too mechanical.

But the point is that you know you are there at the behest of Luthuli House and you are told that all the time. You are *deployed*. I hate that word. Whenever people said I was deployed, I said, I am sorry, no. I am a volunteer, not deployed. I refuse that characterisation. I am not deployed. I am here because I want to be here. So, it is the wrong concept in my opinion and in the end with the ANC this is actually a fundamental issue. The ANC is a voluntary organisation but one which tries to exercise a semi-military discipline. This is the central contradiction. You can leave at any time. There is no penalty. You are free to come and to go. So, it is a voluntary organisation and yet, as a volunteer, you are deployed. And I really feel there is a contradiction there. I didn't join an army. This is not uMkhonto weSizwe where it is just straight up and down. But I was in the minority in thinking this way and the language within caucus is deploy, deploy, deploy.

But to answer your question, even within this I think there are things that can be done. We should never surrender to the bullying of Luthuli House. I have been asked for advice on the inauguration of new MPs by the ANC. Many people involved in parliament feel that this briefing is crucial because you start on the right footing as an MP. You need to know your rights and your limitations and your role. It is quite difficult stuff. The more comprehensive briefing you get, the better. If I was invited to speak to new MPs on this, I will take up this point that you are raising. An ANC MP must exercise a degree of discretion. You can't flout Luthuli House because you won't get away with it. They will discipline you. You are a deployee. But within the parameters of deployee, you do have room to manoeuvre. Take the BEE legislation, Rob Davies was chair our committee considering it and we were sent legislation from cabinet. We thought it was very unsatisfactory and we rewrote the definitions and the legislation. We changed it into broad-based. Triple BEE comes from our committee and we worked on it. We put in co-operatives and a whole lot of progressive jazz to illustrate the need to broaden the economy. To create an economy that works for everyone, to quote Ramaphosa. We did that, and the minister had to accept it because we put our foot down.

So, we made a political decision which fortunately was not against ANC policy. On the contrary it was with the spirit of ANC policy, if not the letter. So, if you are smart and committed, there is room to do it. If you really put your mind to it and are willing to work at it and know the issues then there are things can do. Take the budget for example. Trevor Manuel used to present. He is a character. Very good performer but little reality. So, he would perform and would come to the finance committee with Maria Ramos and Tito Mboweni. So, you are sitting there, and you think that something is wrong so you ask a question and they have to come with an answer. The rules require an answer. So, you can actually push [against the tide](#). Yunis Carrim has done excellent work as chair of finance doing exactly that. So yes, it is possible, but it needs a lot of effort. It needs skill. It needs brains. It needs education.

**What you have implied by this is that it does make a difference who is in parliament and what they do. There has been a debate on the broad left about electoral politics and whether the left should be contesting elections. The first part of that debate regards this new party aligned to NUMSA, the SRWP, which did abysmally in the elections. What do you make of state of the left in electoral politics?**

Firstly, let me say that Irvin Jim is a very unsatisfactory individual. As an individual he is irrational. His politics is rather poor, and rather basic. He is a "revolutionary socialist". In this day and age, I ask you, what does that mean? What is a "revolutionary socialist now"? He doesn't know. So, when he wants to stand for parliament and put up a parliamentary party, I think his own members knew it was a joke. They want to expose capitalism. Yes sure, let us expose capitalism but in the name of what? So, one can dismiss it. The fact that [Zwelinzima] Vavi is not part of this project shows this. Vavi is a much more sensible person and his refusal to endorse the project shows what it is about.

**There has been an [interesting debate](#) recently between Ronnie Kasrils and Jeremy Cronin about the SACP, state capture and remaining within the alliance. What do you make of this debate?**

I have written to Ronnie and I said to him that the job of the left is to prepare the grounds for a left-wing party and alliance. Ronnie seems to think that the SACP can put up a candidate somewhere as a flag and even if he doesn't get in, he thinks it is important to make a statement. I don't agree.

The job of the left is to conscientise the working class because if you don't, you make a fool of yourself. You become isolated. That is what has happened to Irwin Jim. I sometimes think that Ronnie and even Jeremy forget this. You know their slogan is "Build Socialism now." Build socialism now!? What are you talking about? Under this capitalist, colonial system and you just say, "build socialism now." So, you set up a co-operative somewhere. Is that socialism? This is a confusion of ideology completely. Socialism is not a group here or there.

If a socialist in South Africa says we want the state to lead the economy. This state? At this time? How long is it going to take before we fix the state. Socialists must have a realistic policy given the condition of our state. If we are talking about the South African road to socialism then we must surely take account of this. Our state system is a mess. As progressives we need to seriously grapple with what we do given the incapacities of the state. You must put your feet on the ground. If you want to win support which is what this is about then you need to think about how it will be received by the masses. You need to persuade.

I am in favour of a broad left emerging in some form or other. We have been saying so for a long time. If a new group is created, it's task must be primarily to win the argument. I think socialists must be a little bit humble these days. As far as we are concerned, we have a wonderful theory. Marx's analysis of capitalism is brilliant and is for all time. But from there, the next step to socialism is rather poor. If you look at Vietnam, marvellous revolutionary theory developed. But look at them today. Look at China. Look at Cuba. The fact of the matter is the second stage of building a socialist future is very unsure. We don't know the answers.

I think that socialists must create a broad left and discuss these questions. What is your programme? What do you stand for? If I am a worker and you come to my factory and we have a meeting and you say you want socialism, I will say yes, I like the idea. I hate capitalism. But how does socialism work? Give me an example. Is it like Vietnam? Like Cuba? Like China? What are you talking about? Is it the "dictatorship of the proletariat"? Is it the Communist Manifesto?

So, my answer to you is that we need to be strategic and think hard about what we are doing. And we have to look at the context. After all, why is the left not active in SA today? Why is the SACP so poor? There must be an objective fact. Poor leadership is definitely a factor but at the same time *why*? The SACP is not a mass movement. It is not a major movement. There is no clear programme. I don't know what they stand for at the moment.



It seems to me that the left must develop a position which is credible. So that the ordinary person in the street says, "that makes sense." In the end we still have an apartheid legacy. It is still strong. If we don't attend to that then no amount of talk about growth or what not will help us. The legacy sticks. I live in Noordhoek and then you see Masiphumelele just up the road. It is an absolute scandal. You come to my house and everything works. The water runs. The electricity is on. And then 2km up the road you have a terrible situation. People can't live like that. If you are talking about socialism, then it must include that. If it doesn't include that then we are wasting our time. It has to have a mass content. We have to fix the townships. We have to give people work. That is part of a transition to socialism. Otherwise it is all pie in the sky. You can quote the manifesto as long as you like. You can quote Marx or Lenin. That is fine. The theory is important. But if you haven't got a position that appeals to the condition of the people then you are wasting your time.