



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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MAWSON: My name is Amy Mawson, and I'm here with Benedict James van der Ross. The date is the 9th of February, 2010. First of all, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview, we really appreciate your time. [...] Maybe I could start off just by asking you how you came to be appointed to the IEC [Independent Electoral Commission] in 1994, what the process was, and how you first found out that you were going to be on this body.

ROSS: *[Chuckling.] Well, I'll tell you the truth, I'm not politically involved in any way. I never have been and I don't propose to be. I don't like politicians, and I have a great jaundice about them and the business of politics in general. So I was a very unlikely candidate to become involved to start off with.*

I was working at the time for an organization called the Independent Development Trust, which was a social development agency, a very interesting one. It might serve you well to investigate its activity at that time, because it was unusual in the sense that it was funded by the then government but it had been set up completely independently of government. It was a very unusual situation.

Be that as it may, the chap that was heading it—was asked to head it by government—was a member of the [...], an ex-judge, and he had previously headed the biggest search and development agency in the country, called the Urban Foundation, which I had also worked for. I'd known him for many years and worked with him in various capabilities. I'm a lawyer by training as well. Just out of the blue I got a telephone call from a chap by the name of Colin Eiglin. If you know the name, Colin was a leading member of what was then the Progressive Party—or was it already the Democratic Party—the thing that is now the Democratic Alliance, but it was then the Democratic Party.

He spoke to me and said, look, each of the political parties was being asked to nominate a representative to the commission. They were at something of a loss to nominate him. After some discussions with various people—he didn't give me details—they'd come up with the suggestion that I should be asked. Now I thought it was rather odd because I had nothing to do with him politically. I said to him, "Look, it's not really something—." But the way they described the job to me, it was a kind of sitting on a committee. I knew nothing about elections, absolutely nothing about elections. I'd never been involved in the things; I hadn't planned, I'd never voted. I couldn't vote. I'm colored, so I had the option to vote in these sham things that the government had set up, and I'd never voted in those; I just ignored the lot.

So it's not an area of any kind of interest or expertise as far as I was concerned. But obviously, one had been following the process leading up to this election very closely, and one felt that if you could do something you'd go ahead. But I really, at that point, was of the view that this was going to be sort of like an overseeing board of directors kind of thing; you'd have a couple of meetings once in a while and sort of oversee the thing. Ha, ha, I was very wrong about that.

But be that as it may, I said, "Look, I'll speak to [...], and if [...] is prepared to allow me to do it—because obviously I was employed by them. I spoke to [...], and [...] said fine. Later on I discovered that he had actually spoken to [...] because they were good friends. He'd said to [...], they've got this situation and they needed to nominate somebody. They needed to find somebody who was going to be tough enough to stand up to what they were scared of, which was that the political parties would try to manipulate the process within the commission to their own ends. They wanted somebody who would be able to be, I supposed, skilled

enough to be able to handle that kind of interaction, and [...] said, "I've got just the guy for you." So he had actually nominated me.

So I went in there as a sort of hatchet man. It was one of those sorts of things. In the end I must say that to the credit of the people who were in fact members of the various parties—because all of the others were—I was the only one who was actually non-aligned, as it were. They didn't try and do that. It was a very fair process. Everybody behaved impeccably. Maybe because they realized that the others were not going to allow them to get away with it. I don't know whether it was that or not, but in the way it came across.

MAWSON: So it was around the beginning of '94 when you were appointed?

ROSS: *I was appointed in the closing stages of '93, and we had a preliminary meeting somewhere between Christmas and the New Year. We were called to a meeting in government buildings in Cape Town. We actually started in the first week of January.*

MAWSON: Could you tell me a little bit about that first meeting? We like sometimes to just get some sort of flavor of what the atmosphere was like.

ROSS: *It was very tentative. Everybody was tentative. You didn't really know what to expect. None of the people there had been involved in any of these kinds of processes before. Obviously, the transitional authority that had been—the negotiating process that had been taking place, everybody had been following closely. None of these people had actually been directly involved in that, though. One or two might have been, I'm not sure. But people did realize that this was going to be, and it was explained to us that this was going to be a big job and a difficult job.*

You see, the problem with this election, and I'm not sure how this compares with other similar processes, is that there was an enormous amount of mistrust. The opposition, the disenfranchised parties, the ANC [African National Congress] in particular, were extremely suspicious that the current incumbents would try to railroad the process or undermine the process in some shape or form. The result was that, although the country had a very well-oiled election machine in place, we were not allowed to use a pencil that came out of that process—absolutely nothing, not the systems, not the stationery, not the equipment, not the physical locations, nothing. So you had four months within which to set up this entire machinery from scratch.

MAWSON: What about the staff from the old sort of election management?

ROSS: *There were one or two people that were brought in to assist, and to a very large extent they were sidelined, because of the suspicion—it is one of those things that was—. You see, I can't say whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. In the end, the new people who were brought in to run the thing did a reasonable job. So the thing worked, it worked acceptably well. But I know there was a lot of frustration amongst the couple of people that were brought from the old sort of regime.*

My own sense was that those individuals were in fact trying to help to make sure that things actually went smoothly. But there was just so much suspicion that as I said, these guys were deliberately sidelined.

- MAWSON: As you said, that first meeting was quite tentative. What was discussed at that first meeting? Do you remember—or was it more just about meeting each other?
- ROSS: *No, no, it was an administrative meeting. At that point we'd all been nominated, so there was no question, we knew that we were going to be the commission. Some of the duties were explained to us, and there were some logistical kinds of things about administration and so on as to what would happen, what we could expect, and what we needed to do. It was Christmas—how are you going to sort this thing out? Everybody was given a little bit of time—not a lot of time, days really—to go and get your own personal affairs sorted out.*
- In my own instance, for example, I was completely under the wrong impression about the time, because I went up there on the basis that I was going to stay in my normal job and I would go up there once or twice a week for meetings. I did that for a couple of weeks, and then I realized: no, this is not going to work. The result was that there was a period for about nearly a month and a half when I didn't even come home. I didn't come back to Cape Town at all, I just stayed there. We were working like 20 hours a day.*
- MAWSON: You were away in Pretoria?
- ROSS: *No, Johannesburg. The offices were in Johannesburg.*
- MAWSON: So that first meeting, who was advising you at that point? Was it just the commissioners meeting and deciding what they were going to do, or were there external advisors that were sort of laying the groundwork?
- ROSS: *As far as I can remember, [Johann] Kriegler was there, of course, so we met him. I didn't know him before that. There were one or two other chaps who I think were government officials. You must remember that the entire thing took place all under the auspices of an act which had been covered through government finances and controlled through the auditor-general. So they were the right people to go and set the thing up and sort of get us going. It wasn't a meeting of any real substance, it was an administrative meeting.*
- MAWSON: OK, so in January was when you really started to get down to the work?
- ROSS: Yes.
- MAWSON: Were tasks sort of divided up? How did you plan out what you were going to do when?
- ROSS: *In the early stages—some work had taken place, and that work took place independently of us. Now I'm not sure exactly who did that, quite frankly, because when we got into session we found that a number of the key appointments to the administrative staff had already been made. Who did that? I must be quite honest, I don't know. But clearly I suspect that that was some [...] between the various political parties that resulted in that. We were simply as a commission invested with this group of people who were basically going to do the actual administration of the election. Some were good and some weren't so good, but by and large they were OK.*
- The commission itself started off in a general way, looking at a number of issues. They really started functioning as if they were a board of directors. I'm a very experienced company director; that's what I do for a living, so I understand how those relationships work. As you would normally—you would have an executive*

over there who would actually do the work. They would come, they would present issues to you, and you'd make some decisions based on that—they'd come to you when they have a problem, basically.

MAWSON: Yes.

ROSS: *Obviously, you must remember also that it wasn't up to us to design the format of the election; that had been negotiated already in the previous process. So there were a number of key issues there, like for example the important fact that there was a decision taken that every voter had to be able to walk to a voting station. This caused chaos and mayhem, let me tell you, from a logistical point of view, but that was the decision that was made in the negotiation: we were simply told, that was the story. So a whole lot of those kinds of criteria were predetermined; our job was to implement it.*

So what we were doing there was implementing the principles that had been negotiated somewhere else. Part of the problem, of course, was that some of those principles were still in the process of being negotiated, and those actually caused quite a bit of problems, because some of them came back differently from what we had anticipated they would be, and they actually forced us to make some very serious changes during the course of the work.

The people who were appointed, the key staff were appointed externally from our direct control.

MAWSON: Can I ask then, when you first started working with the IEC, what were the major challenges that you were anticipating that over the coming three-and-a-half months that you had to prepare the elections, and what were the major challenges that the IEC as an institution was anticipating? Were there differences between what you were anticipating as challenges and what the IEC was anticipating?

ROSS: *Well, let me just go back to your earlier question and survey. You must remember that when I walked in the door the first time I had no expectations. I had no clue whatsoever. What I quickly began to realize was that what you were trying to do here was set up an organization of—this was a sort of an awareness and a realization that dawned on me in stages over a period of some weeks, because you began to understand what this thing was all about.*

This factor that I mentioned earlier was very important, that you realized that you couldn't use anything from the previous—anything that was currently existent. So everything had to be sort of turned over. You were trying within a period of four months to create an organization of a quarter of a million people. You had an application that 9,500 places, the voting stations, the timeframe that we'd been able to work out, to get all the bits and pieces, because we then started to put the thing together; this had to be done, etc. The logistical thing, it was such that there was no time for a test run of any sort. You were to get this, and you were to press the button, and it's got to work. That was really frightening, a daunting task.

MAWSON: Can I ask then, maybe: you're talking about how you only had four months to do this, and it struck me when I was doing background reading before coming out here that it was quite ironic that there had been almost four years of party negotiations, but they gave the election just four months to put together the entire process that would sort of legitimate the entire transition.

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- ROSS: *What part of that don't you understand? The first part was controlled by politicians. You just had to go and do this, that was no big deal. I mean, they'd done the difficult part, you must just knock this off. That's the problem with politicians, they have no idea about the question of how you actually implement anything.*
- MAWSON: So you were dealing with this quite limited timeframe, and you as the IEC, you really couldn't do anything about the fact that you had this very short time span.
- ROSS: *No, we had no control of it whatsoever, and we simply had to do the best we could. I can tell you that we had—as I think happens with most of these kinds of situation, we had a number of international delegations of observers and advisors, that kind of thing. These people actually came in formal delegation to the chairman; it must have been somewhere late February or something of the sort. They had experience of these kinds of situations. They—I discovered that this business of elections is actually a big profession amongst people around the world. I don't know about that, but be that as it may, there certainly are people who are very skilled and really do understand this and have a lot of experience.*
- They came to Kriegler and said to him, "You have to try and postpone this thing; you're trying the impossible, this thing is logistically not possible, what you're trying to do here."*
- He had to say to them, "Look, I'm sorry but that is just absolutely not negotiable. The parties are not prepared to even think about it."*
- MAWSON: So you were really in a bind.
- ROSS: *That was it. That was when you started working 20 hours a day because you realized this thing—the consequence of failure here was just too ghastly to contemplate.*
- MAWSON: So from your perspective, there wasn't really enough time, but you had to just do it.
- ROSS: *Look, the end result was imperfect, to say the least. There was no way that we had any kind of way of judging how successful—. Look, you'd planned a whole range of things, you'd appointed a whole range of people, you got a whole lot of stuff in place. You had training sessions all over the show, but you didn't really know how well those things had worked. You kind of were in the hands of the Gods as far as whatever it was that people out there had been doing. It was the only way to do it.*
- MAWSON: So aside from the sort of logistical worries that you might have had about whether the election would actually work or not, were you at all worried about security? For example, in KwaZulu-Natal, where you had just this enormous amount of violence, and then also problems in other parts of the country as well, problems with the white riots, were you concerned as an institution at the IEC about what was happening? Did you do anything through your actions to address any of that? I don't mean security; I know you were not in charge of the security, but actually sort of whether it be building trust or liaising with the parties to try to dampen down that violence or those divisions?
- ROSS: *Yes, Kriegler himself did quite a bit of that. He met with all the parties on an ongoing basis. I must tell you something: this country will never, ever understand what it owes that man. I mean he was fantastic, he was absolutely fantastic. He*

*was calm, he never lost his composure. It was an extremely difficult job because many of the people didn't trust him, even within the IEC, commissioners in the parties, because of his background. He was a white Afrikaner and all that kind of thing. But I can tell you that he behaved absolutely impeccably in his commitment and the way in which he dealt with these kinds of issues, because he had to meet with Mandela, he had to meet with Buthelezi. I on one occasion—
anecdotally—the problem in KwaZulu-Natal, it was Natal, was multifaceted. There was this violence that was going on which appeared to be a sort of—well, one didn't know really what it was; was it tribal, was it political; it might have been a bit of both, it might have been people trying to mislead others about what was actually going on—it could have been a combination of all those things.*

Formally, from the point of view of the commission, we didn't get involved in that at all. As you might have learned from what I've said, we were quite busy. We didn't have time to worry about that. Somebody else had to worry about that. We just didn't have the time to think about that. But when it came to the question of actually liaising with the leadership, Kriegler clearly had to take on some of that, and did. In Natal, Buthelezi played a game of sort of big time brinksmanship. He held out right to the end. He was going to stay out. That was, for example, one of the things where we did have authority. I'm not sure how much authority we had and how much authority we just assumed. I think it was a bit of both, but quite a lot of the latter.

There was a point at which you simply just were not going to go and ask anybody for permission, because you didn't have the time to, so you just had to go and do something and get this thing sorted out. But, for example, we had said, the commissioner had said to Buthelezi, formally, "Look here,"—the IFP [Inkatha Freedom Party], basically—"these are the dates, you decide, you're in or you're out. If you're in you're in, if you're out you're out." That's it. Not a long discussion, that's the story. "You're no different from anybody else, that's the way it works."

Of course, they missed the deadline, and then they summoned Kriegler to meet with Buthelezi in—what's the name of their capital—IFP stronghold. Where this got interesting was, Kriegler took a delegation. It consisted of [...] who was a man from that area, Helen Suzman, and myself. We had later on divided up the responsibilities within the commission, and I was chairman of the committee that actually oversaw the logistics of the running of the election, so that's why I was asked to go. It was one of the most harrowing experiences of my life.

We went into this thing, and we found that we were actually supposed to be meeting the king. Now, I come from the kind of background where I'm not strong on kings, I don't actually understand this kind of relationship. To me kings are not a big deal kind of thing. But we got in there, and we were taken into a room in which we sat and we had to wait. Eventually the king arrived there with an entourage, and they all sat in a big semicircle. Some lady started serving tea and cake and whatnot. The judge was trying to start talking to the king. Buthelezi said, "No, no, you cannot. Don't say a word." The king just sat and drank his tea, didn't look left or right. Most unusual, awkward type of situation.

Anyway, I'm a small guy, I just shut up and drank my tea. Eventually this was done. At a point there was a signal of some sort, and everyone stood and everyone just followed suit. The king stood and walked out. There was some sort of guard that walked out. We had no idea what was going to happen.

Then we walked through a passageway, and the next thing, we found ourselves in the House of Assembly, packed to the rafters with Zulus. I thought, hell, this is

how [...] must have felt. This was not a friendly atmosphere. We went—I was going to sit over there, there was a raised dais over there—we sat and looked like the accused in front of the Zulus. Then the king proceeded to deliver a lecture to us on just who he was and what he thought of this whole process and all the rest of it. When he was finished, he left. He didn't wait for anybody to respond.

Then they had a situation where one after the other they had people getting up and slamming the IEC and criticizing us and carrying on. I'm thinking to myself, I actually would like to go home. I really don't want to be here. But anyway, what could you do, you sat there. Eventually Buthelezi launched into a speech, and Buthelezi is renowned for not making short speeches. So this process took hours. Right at the end they allowed Kriegler to respond.

MAWSON: After how many hours had this been?

ROSS: *This must have been about three hours or something like that that this had been carrying on. I thought to myself, now hold on a second, if I were you I'd go up and I'd say, thank you, I note this and we'll go and consider your—and we'll come back. No, not Johann. He launched into an attack and carried on. I thought, are you bloody mad? These buggers will just sling us up. No, he went at them and gave them a lecture on—. Anyway, the end result was that we left, fortunately, as you note, with our lives. But it was a show. It was a show to actually try and rattle us and I think he demonstrated that he wasn't going to fall for it.*

The end result was they actually then came back and said they want to participate.

MAWSON: So when was this delegation? Do you remember when you went there?

ROSS: *I can't remember the dates, but the closing date for registration had already passed, so it was after that. I think it was about a month or so before the actual election, it may have been six weeks or so. I think it was about a month before the election that they actually came in, because there were huge logistical implications as a consequence of that meeting; it was a real nightmare situation. But I think it was the right thing to do to actually accommodate them.*

So your question about what role did he play: I think that that was probably the single biggest role that he played in relation to actually getting these people on board. I know that he had numbers of meetings with Constand Viljoen, the Freedom Front and those kinds of people as well. I'm sure that those meetings must have gone a long way to again settling in the minds of people that whatever was going to happen, we would make sure that nobody was going to be allowed to do anything dishonest, that we would control the situation in such a way that there would be a fair result. Whatever else is up, it would be a fair result. That's it.

MAWSON: Considering that you were—you said that you were the chair for the logistical aspect of the elections.

ROSS: Yes.

MAWSON: So I've been wondering. It seems like the IEC had obviously a very difficult task in this quite short time period, but the biggest challenge as far as I could see was having to run the election all over the entire territory of South Africa, including these areas that were extremely difficult to access.

ROSS: Yes.

MAWSON: Such as Natal and also the former homeland—.

ROSS: *Ciskei, Transkei, yes.*

MAWSON: And also Bophuthatswana.

ROSS: Yes.

MAWSON: So how did you start to access those areas, because it was very difficult, no? To get into those areas and figure out where you're going to have polling stations and to do voter education in those areas. So how did you do that?

ROSS: *The way we did it was an object lesson in what you can achieve in a very short space of time if you're able to use appropriate competence. Let me give you just one example. The business of identifying the voting stations was, as you can rightly understand, very difficult. One of the things that happened was—let me give you an example. You see, when you set up the voting station, let's say this is your voting station here, you design this in theory; it has got to have an entrance and it has to have an exit. It has to have polling booths there, it has to have a table in here where you collect your whatever it is; you go through there, you put your ballot paper here and you come out. Then you've got to have a circular motion like that, otherwise the thing doesn't work. You know you're going to deal with a lot of people.*

Now you must remember that the election dealt with—it was two different elections. It was the election in respect of the national thing as well as the provincial. The question was whether you were going to be able to use one process with one box, two boxes but in the same place, to actually deposit your survey. It didn't matter that there were two things, you would just do the same thing here and here. But that issue had not been settled, whether it was going to be one or two.

MAWSON: Ballot boxes?

ROSS: *Locations of the ballot boxes. They were still arguing out in the negotiating processes as this was going on; they were arguing about that continuously. Now we had the mother of all jobs to actually locate about 9,000 fixed locations and a thousand mobile locations. There were about 8,000 fixed locations with this physical place being big enough to have all this kind of stuff. Then of course these things belong to somebody; you've got to go and get permission from those people, you've got to get authority, you've got to negotiate, some people are difficult, and dah dah dah.*

Again, about a month or so before the election, the negotiating process decided they wouldn't exit there; there were going to be two, which increased the size that you required, because then you had to work out a different flow, and it increased the size of the location you required. I think about 1,500 of the places were too small.

MAWSON: When did they decide that?

ROSS: *It was about a month, about six weeks or so before the actual election. We had to find another 1,500 places. So this was not easy. Let me tell you how we did it.*

We had a firm of project managers—you know the Lost City, the palace of the Lost City. You know that institution out in Sun City.

MAWSON: No, sorry, I thought you were talking about some myth.

ROSS: *No, no, one of our biggest resorts is a place called Sun City out in Rustenburg, and it has a place called the Lost City there. You should try and visit it some time; it is quite an institution. It is really quite—it is a manmade forest with a million trees and all kinds of—it's a really impressive place. These guys had built the Lost City, they were the project managers that built the Lost City. We engaged them to handle that process. You see?*

We were sitting at the moment with a situation where somebody who's politically correct's brother-in-law gets put in the job to go and do something that he is patently incapable of doing. We were able, because of the pressure, to simply select the very best people we could find to do the job, and that's what we did. The reason why the thing worked was because we were able to do that. We had numbers of situations where we just brought in firms of engineers and people—at the end of the day this is a big project, so you want project managers, people who actually know how to make things happen. That's how it was done.

MAWSON: Specifically for accessing areas in KwaZulu-Natal, I've seen references to this program called Operation Access. Were you involved in that program at all?

ROSS: *No, not personally.*

MAWSON: Do you know anything about it?

ROSS: *No.*

MAWSON: I've only been able to find very vague references to it.

ROSS: *No, no. Look, there were numbers of programs that were running in parallel. I don't think Operation Access was something that we were formally—it was run by extra-IEC kind of institutions. There were numbers of those kinds of things. Also, a number of programs were launched in individual areas by the local electoral committee, because regional committees were established, and they actually ran a whole range of things to try and sort out things. I mean, those people were fantastic. A lot of the credit in terms of actually making sure that, for example, access, the voter education material was distributed effectively and all that; we decentralized that completely.*

We were sitting up here in Johannesburg; we couldn't do that. So a tremendous amount of the credit and the specific initiative in those areas were handled there. We didn't even want to know about the mission, we just wanted to know: have you actually got the stuff out, and did you actually manage to achieve.

MAWSON: So related to electoral violence, I'm just wondering, because I had come across the reports that a panel from the [Richard] Goldstone Commission had produced; it was some report on avoiding electoral violence. Were you aware of that when you were preparing for the elections? Were those sorts of documents used?

ROSS: *Not really, no. Because our problem was a huge logistical one: to actually make the machinery, to design it, establish it and make it work. We really just couldn't get involved in those kinds of things. It's as simple as that. At one point the whole building that we had out in the middle of Johannesburg was—barricades were*

put up around it, because of some threat or something. But this was a rumor to us, we didn't even know about it. We had nothing to do with it.

MAWSON: At what point was it that you were saying you started to—you didn't go home for a month and a half, and you're working these very, very long hours. Did that start gradually or all come at once?

ROSS: *I think that once we'd been up here from the middle of January or so, you began to realize that this was all hands on deck. The enormity of it all kind of dawned on you, and then it was just flat out from there.*

MAWSON: So could you tell me a bit more about that? I mean—?

ROSS: *It's just that there was a lot to do. There were constant problems, it was not a smooth process. There was, for example, a lot of tension around the printing of the ballot papers. Now there was no question in South Africa, we were more than capable of printing the ballot papers here; we had hundreds of firms who could do it quite easily, but nobody, the ANC particularly, was not prepared to allow the ballot papers to be printed here, because they were scared that somebody would in fact have access to the plates and be able to have their own ballot papers printed, etc. So the papers were printed over in England, I think. That had to be negotiated and sorted out. So there was a lot of tension around that. These were backing and forthing, and how do you do this, and then the layouts and how do you actually set them out. Eventually, I think, it was done on the basis of a draw as to who would be on top and who—the ANC ended up quite low down on the sheet eventually. Then there were still other things that happened.*

The ballot papers came over in one of these Russian freight aircraft. It was the biggest freight aircraft in the world at the time, and it was the only one big enough to actually bring the stuff out. Why they didn't use two planes I don't know, but they decided to do it that way.

We get a panic call at about 3 o'clock in the morning, 2 o'clock in the morning—we were still there—to say that the plane is in the air, the plane is on its way; it is in fact quite close to South Africa already, and they've done all the calculations and they've just decided now that with this load of stuff on it, the thing is too heavy to land at the Johannesburg airport. Eventually they discovered that the only airstrip in the country that was built to the specifications and could handle the weight was in fact the one at Waterkloof, which is the Air Force base. Of course, now you're going to land this thing in the middle of the Afrikaner Air Force and they've now got all this—of course the ANC guys went ballistic.

What do you want us to do? Don't ask, charge Waterkloof, to go to ship this thing out, make sure that nobody gets into the thing. I didn't even go. I mean, I'm not getting involved in that nonsense.

MAWSON: Do you remember when that was, when the ballot papers came in?

ROSS: *I can't remember the dates. It wasn't long before the election, because they didn't want the papers to be in the country for too long.*

MAWSON: My goodness.

ROSS: *But you know, those kinds of things were happening. I'm just naming one example. Everything—there were just hundreds of things that were going wrong. For example, another thing, big logistical thing—two things, and this in fact goes*

to some of the security issues. The security forces, army and police, obviously, were not disempowered; they were still in charge of those responsibilities. We had a negotiation going on with them around the question of securing all of the voting stations, making sure that they were safe, that somebody was there to make sure there was some authority available in case anything did go wrong.

Two of the commissioners who were members of my committee were in this negotiation with them. One of them was a top lawyer and mediator. The other one was actually an ex-president of the president's council, Afrikaans chap, national bodyguard. They were negotiating. Every morning we would have a meeting of our little committee, and these guys would come back and say they can't sort this thing out because the armed forces are saying that they can only secure about 7,000 facilities. We've got to reduce the number of locations to 7,000 so that they can do their job.

The problem is, on the other side, the parties are saying, you've got to go with this criterion about walking or being able to walk, and that works out to this 8,500, 9,500. They're back and they're forth, and eventually we start getting to the point where this is now really getting very tight. So I go to Johann Kriegler, and I say, "Listen, this is the story, what do we do here now?"

So he says to me, "Look, we don't have an option. We must have 9,500, so go tell them that." So I walk into this room and I say to my colleagues, "I want to speak to these chaps myself now so [...] General this-and-that." I say to them, "Gentlemen, I know and I appreciate that you've been very busy here and you've been trying hard, but the situation here is that we will have 9,500 voting stations. Will you please do your best, and the rest we'll assume responsibility for. Thank you very much." And I walk out. No discussion, don't allow discussion. One of the best moments of my life. I wouldn't do that over, the South African Defense Force.

The guys were apoplectic. My colleagues came back and said those guys went ballistic, but there was nothing they could do. That was the story.

Now, one of the things that happened in this process when they changed the size, was that the project managers who were responsible for finding these locations—. It was a major source of concern to me, so I was several times a day going in there to overlook and see what progress you've made, what progress you've made. It became obvious to me—again, it must have been about a month or so before, quite shortly after the decision was made—I realized, looking at the time, that they were not going to find these places. There was a very good chance that they were not going to find these places.

So I phoned a friend of mine who was a senior executive in a big construction company in Cape Town, and I said, "Listen, this is our problem. Can't we design a voting station—." What I'd been thinking of was something like sort of poles and [...] or something or another that you could actually send the design to the people on-site and say, make this thing from local materials and create it. That is one of those stories that has never been written up. But within a matter of hours he came back to me, and he said, "Look, that's not going to work. Your risk factor is too great that you either are not going to be able to source the stuff, you're going to have to train somebody to create the thing, and you don't know who you're dealing with." Their view is that we must actually design something very simple, make 1,500 of them, and get them to the site.

I said to him, "George, you're going to do this in the next three weeks?"

He said, "Yes." Within 24 hours of that time they actually designed a structure, made a prototype, brought it to Johannesburg, rigged it up in our board room and showed us what it was. We approved it, and they went back and they made those things and had them delivered on-site, about 1,200 sites.

MAWSON: Wow. That's quite some feat.

ROSS: *They used very simple construction, something that you often see street vendors use, sort of an awning which is basically aluminum poles covered in shade cloth, and they just designed it in the right size. I think they used something like 15km of aluminum tubing, and I don't know how many hectares of shade cloth. He says every CMT (cut, make and trim) little business in Cape Town was making these things over the next couple of weeks. He just got the whole country—but it was just one of those things that they did.*

The point I'm making is, I didn't have to go out at that point and have a long discussion about being politically correct, about making sure that I've got five black women and three disabled people and dah dah dah, as we have in the country at the moment, to try to make sure that I could award the contract. I didn't have to go through a long tender process either. Within hours we actually managed to just get that done.

MAWSON: That's the impression I got actually from all of the reading I was doing before coming here. The IEC did not have much time, but you were able to take a very flexible approach, so that every time a problem arose you could deal with it. Every time another problem arose, you dealt with it.

ROSS: *That's what we did.*

MAWSON: The only thing I was wondering, though, as I was sort of realizing that that had been the necessary approach, was: did you ever find that there were decisions that you made that down the line created more problems, and then you made decisions about those? Did that ever happen?

ROSS: *Nothing significant. Look, I mean, the thing is that you must remember, when you make decisions like that, very often they're not perfect decisions, but you know you kind of work with what you've got. This is the situation, this is the reality, you take it from there. You just do the next thing. You don't sit and worry about what might have—you just take the next step.*

MAWSON: So everybody in the IEC at that time was sort of working off that premise, or were there some people who were more sticklers for procedure?

ROSS: *No, no, you see, I think that—[chuckling]. You had a couple of different kinds of people there. I think they realized quite early on that I had the ability and the—I'm patting myself on the back, just your own experience and what you'd been doing previously, and your own sort of things that you'd been doing. As I said, I wasn't brought here for that—but I've done a lot of things in the project management field, various kinds of things. So I understand how these kinds of things work. I understand how to work with contractors and that sort of thing, being an attorney.*

I think they just said, do this, just get it done. So a couple of them really were out of their depth in terms of the implementation side but were very good in terms of making sure that we didn't do overtly stupid things that would antagonize people and cause all kinds of problems.

So the fine-tuning of propositions would come up. There would be a big debate about it, but at the end of the day the implementation was really—we were trusted to go do. They trusted a couple of us to go do this. Obviously I wasn't working alone. I wasn't executively in charge of those things; I was only—from a supervision point of view. A chap by the name of Yunus Mohammed—died, in fact, a year or so ago—was really the cornerstone of the actual implementation, the physical implementation, very good. Also an attorney from Durban.

MAWSON: So what I understand from what you've been saying is, you were so busy you really didn't have a chance to think necessarily about the political side of things; you just had to implement the elections. But the one thing I've been wondering as I'm hearing you talk about this is, sometimes some of the things you're talking about—you were sort of rubbing up against some of the more politically sensitive things.

ROSS: Yes.

MAWSON: And you were having to make those kinds of decisions that might antagonize people. So I'm wondering: were you, other people in the IEC, particularly concerned about building up the parties' or the public's trust in the IEC? Was that anybody's specific job, or was anybody taking that responsibility more than others?

ROSS: *No, we knew that the key thing was to make sure that everything we did would stand up to scrutiny, that nobody was doing anything that was underhanded, that nobody was doing anything that was dishonest, that everything was transparent and that nobody could challenge us on whether or not we were acting in the best interests of the country as opposed to a party. We simply just worked on that premise. We said, this is a job, we're going to do this job properly.*

It was exactly the thing, as I said earlier, that Colin Eglin was scared of, that people might start trying to manipulate, but they didn't. So it wasn't an issue.

MAWSON: So when you said you were doing everything transparently—I mean, for example, I was just in Lesotho, and the IEC there was saying, everything is so transparent we don't understand why people don't trust us. I was wondering, with the IEC here in '94, were you taking specific steps to actually publicize what you were doing—?

ROSS: Yes.

MAWSON: So that although it was transparent, also you were informing people—.

ROSS: *Yes, Johann had regular press conferences, almost every day. You'd meet with the press, and he would talk and tell them what was going on. People knew what was going on. But I think that a very strong part of the settling of those kinds of suspicions was in fact dealt with by the constitution of the IEC itself, by the fact that the people who were put there were very much trusted people by their own constituencies. So if [...] was prepared to go with something or [...] was prepared to go with something, then people weren't going to challenge that. They were a first-class group of people. They were really people of stature. I mean, I was the only one who was really from nowhere. I ended up just being a mechanic, which is all I wanted to be anyway.*

MAWSON: I'm just wondering—I'm not sure how easy this question will be to answer, because it seems from what you're saying that there were multiple challenges along the way, and multiple things that happened that forced you to change your original idea of what you were planning to do. But could you maybe sketch for me a few key moments when things happened along the way where you realized, oh no, we can't do that, we have to do this; you know what I mean?

ROSS: *Yes. Well, I've mentioned a couple of the key ones already, but I would say that the seminal moments were the final determination on the actual location of the voting stations. That was a huge logistical problem, and it was not something that got fixed at the beginning and you could work your way through; it was a moving target, and that presented a lot of problems which then had knock-on problems which had to be resolved. So that was probably logistically the biggest thing.*

No, let me go back on that. The thing that impacted on the other logistical aspects, which is basically also around the voting papers themselves, was this late entry by IFP. Because what happened then was, we had to actually reprint the papers. That had to be done here. They were in fact printed here.

MAWSON: I thought that these stickers were printed.

ROSS: *The stickers were printed, yes. But then they had to be rerun in order to get stickers stuck onto the thing. The whole thing was basically done here anyway.*

MAWSON: So when the IFP rejoined, it was my understanding that the IEC then had to put this huge effort to make sure that there would be enough polling stations in KwaZulu-Natal.

ROSS: *No—no extraordinary effort was necessary, because we'd already planned to do that. Whether they were going to be there or not didn't make any difference. There are a lot of other people there besides IFP members.*

MAWSON: Then I heard this story about these pirate voting stations that got set up in KwaZulu-Natal.

ROSS: *There was a claim that that had happened, I never quite got to the bottom of that, I don't know. I can tell you that the numbers—my memory is not that good at this point so I must be careful, but when we actually started the election, the election was supposed to run I think for two days. Eventually we had to extend it by a day simply just because there had been logistical problems. Some of the voting stations didn't open early enough, and the papers didn't get there, people ran out of papers. It was very difficult. How did you know exactly how many papers to send? It was not as if you had a voters' list you were working to. People could go to any station that was close to them. So that was a huge problem—you shuffle things around and whatnot. Then the counting started, and there were all kinds of problems with the counting, and it carried on and on and on.*

We had a sort of a war room in the building there. I didn't see daylight for seven days or something like that. I just sat there. I'd go to my hotel and sleep for a couple of hours, but I'd go at 3 o'clock in the morning and come back at 5 or something like that. For seven days I was just sitting there trying to sort out problems that were coming at us and telling—how do you sort this, what do I do here now? Make a decision about it, because that was the point. You had to make a decision.

People would come to you from the voting stations or from the—they would say, this is the—now what do we do? Somebody with authority has got to make the decision. So a couple of us were in that kind of situation. Obviously again, being the chairman there I probably ended up doing a lot more than the others did. Then of course you had this situation with getting to the end now. Everybody was screaming about: you've got to get finished, and waa, waa, waa. Well there were two reasons, as I can recall, why we weren't finishing the count.

One was that there were ongoing disputes between the party agents at various stations. The other one was that in some areas in Natal there was something going wrong about the assembly of the ballots. It might have been around that; I'm not absolutely sure about that, because at that point as I said we were trying to deal with a lot of balls in the air. What we decided to do then eventually was: there were three or four places where there were disputes going on. We then decided in the early hours of one morning that we would depute four people, commissioners, who would go to those stations and settle the matter, one way or the other. The only time I left the building during that period, I went to the show grounds at Pretoria. There was a big fight between the right-wingers and everybody else. I just walked in, looked at the situation, listened to the story, and I said, that's the decision. Finished, period. Close the process, settle the documentation, and submit it now. The other guys did the same thing, and we did it. That's how we were able to finish the thing.

MAWSON: The votes were counted up at central areas.

ROSS: *Yes. There were counting stations. Those were in big regional centers. So there were those counting stations that were not able to finish because of the disputes that were going on.*

MAWSON: So had there been an idea to do the counting of the votes in the polling stations?

ROSS: *No, that wouldn't have been possible; it would have been too risky. That would have really opened up the hornets' nest. We just didn't have enough control.*

MAWSON: Right.

ROSS: *The people—the relationship we had with the people that were on-site was so tenuous, of such short duration, there was no way we could have trusted those people. No, we had to get this stuff into central places where we could then have teams of people in control of the situation. It worked. In the event, nobody ever appealed. I think maybe part of the reason was exhaustion, I don't know. But I do remember that I sat there for seven days and nights just with problems and problems and problems. Right at the end I went down to the section where the electronic stuff was all kept, where the actual count was being recorded.*

I said, "My god, 11 million people voted, when did that happen?" [Laughing.] The way it looked to me, nobody voted. I didn't see a voting station, I didn't see a queue. I saw nothing. I just saw problems. I didn't even vote.

MAWSON: You didn't have time to vote.

ROSS: *It wasn't so much that I didn't have time to vote. There was quite an interesting story. I must say I was—not deliberately, but afterward, thought I was a little mischievous there. The commissioners would meet for lunch every day. We'd meet sometime in the morning and then we'd go and do our various things and*

we'd have lunch together. That was quite useful because then you could also share little bits of information.

One of these lunchtime meetings, I said to the guys, "You know, the public out there is looking to us to lead by example and show that this is a situation in which we are treating the whole thing with integrity. My view is, it is very difficult for anybody to accept that if you're going to be a player and a referee. Now you're referees. You've accepted the position of being referees, so then don't be players. I think we should make a public statement that none of us is voting."

They looked at me as if I'd come from Mars. They were bloody mad. We've been waiting all our lives to do this. Now I didn't vote. But I didn't vote for two reasons. One was that I genuinely did feel that way. The other was that I didn't have a clue as to who I'd want to vote for because I had no sense of attachment to any of the parties, really. You had an amount of empathy, obviously, for the principles of this one, but for what several of them might have stood for—I just thought, ach.

MAWSON: Could I just ask you: there were a few events that I've been aware of from my reading, and I'm just wondering if they impacted what you were doing at all, and whether you're aware—if it didn't impact you directly, whether it impacted the work of other people that you were working with.

ROSS: Yes.

MAWSON: I'm thinking in March '94, when the AVF [Afrikaner Volksfront, Afrikaner People's Front] went into Bophuthatswana and also the AWB [Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, Afrikaner Resistance Movement] also went in there and caused a lot of problems. Did that impact the work of the IEC at all?

ROSS: *Not directly, because it's not something that we sat and debated and took any action about. But I think that it is quite likely the kind of thing that would have been the subject of the discussions that Johann would have had with some of those leadership figures. But when you speak to Johann, you'll probably be able to pick up on that. I wasn't involved in that.*

MAWSON: You were talking about the tenuous relationship that you had, for example, with people working the polling stations. My understanding is that when the IFP finally rejoined the electoral process and the elections were going to be run in KwaZulu-Natal—I mean, they were always going to be run, but I've just read a few accounts, and maybe you can correct me if I'm wrong—I've read a few accounts, but many more staff had to be recruited at the last minute when the IFP did rejoin the electoral process.

ROSS: *Yes, we did appoint more staff, simply because you realize now that there were going to be more people showing up to vote. So you clearly had to go and relook at the question of the logistics, the number of papers you were sending to each area, and that sort of stuff. We had to do that.*

MAWSON: So when you had to recruit all of these people at the last minute and presumably train them as well, who was in charge of that, and what were the—?

ROSS: *The same process would have kicked in there. That wasn't really all that much of an issue, because the training processes were designed to be able to be handled very shortly before. The people who actually handled, manned the voting stations were only engaged and trained like a week before the election. So it was not that much of a difference. The difference came in concept. You had to say, we're*

looking for X number more people; we must put more equipment over there. But I don't recall that that was really that much of an issue.

MAWSON: It seems like quite a short period to recruit and train people, just a week.

ROSS: *The recruiting period was obviously a little bit before that. But you would actually physically engage them and train them. The process of actually going through the voting thing is not rocket science. You walk in there, the guy will sit over there, and we had charts and things like that designed, and diagrams that show you what to do. It was really something you could learn in a couple of hours, quite frankly.*

MAWSON: I'm thinking more, not necessarily that the actual process is that difficult, but trying to ensure that people are going to be honest in their job. So how do you ensure that they are neutral?

ROSS: *Because the people who were in charge of the voting stations were obviously engaged earlier. They were trained in simple areas, and they were tasked with monitoring—*

MAWSON: I see.

ROSS: *And don't forget that in a voting station your biggest safeguard is the party agents; they keep you honest.*

MAWSON: Right. Can I also ask you: I've been wondering about the dispute resolution system that was in place for the elections in '94—there was a sort of monitoring directorate which [...] mentioned to me, but he didn't really give me the details about. It was only after I was sort of going over my notes that I realized I really hadn't asked him too many questions about that. Do you know how that aspect of the IEC worked? Can you give me some—?

ROSS: *That wasn't dispute resolution; it was a monitoring system which was really—this chap Peter—*

MAWSON: Harris?

ROSS: *Yes, Harris ran that. It was a source of constant annoyance to me, quite frankly. The problem was—you see, their job was—this was entirely born out of the suspicion thing. Their job was to in fact make sure that everybody was dealing with everything with integrity; that was the monitoring. Obviously, that also included monitoring us, the administration section, to ensure that we were in fact doing the job properly, because obviously if the job wasn't done properly, if the logistical job wasn't done properly, then the process inherently would potentially be unfair, because it would fall apart here and there.*

So they were monitoring our performance. We were short of manpower, and I was continuously saying, we've got too many blooming people monitoring and too few people working. Shrink the balance, I understand that originally this was the idea, to have this thing in place. I understand the logic. But now you see that we're sitting in a situation where we really have problems, and they wouldn't change that. So I didn't have a lot of time for those guys. We just carried on.

MAWSON: So that was not the dispute resolution?

ROSS: *No, that wasn't the dispute resolution mechanism; it was just monitoring to make sure those two aspects were covered.*

MAWSON: So what then was the dispute resolution mechanism?

ROSS: *To the extent that there was a dispute resolution mechanism, it lay in the legislation, and I can't remember what the actual charter was that we operated under as an IEC. But we as the commissioners would be called upon to resolve disputes between the parties. That's why I was saying that that manifested itself right at the end.*

Now look, there had been a whole range of other incidents where people had gone and actually had to go and mediate between people. Right at the end it became critical, and then we had to step in.

MAWSON: I don't want to keep you too much longer; I just wanted to ask you, regarding the way the parties were regulated: was there a code of conduct for the political parties in '94, do you know?

ROSS: *I seem to suspect that there was. There was some sort of a code that had been agreed upon between the parties.*

MAWSON: So from your perspective, did the parties behave themselves during the campaign period, for example?

ROSS: *By and large, yes. You always had disputes. You always had somebody cutting up rough about something or another object or something. But by and large—obviously, there were specific party agents that were deputed to actually be in permanent liaison with the IEC. Some of them were always around us. I think we all developed a very good relationship. So there was a good spirit in the place. It wasn't a spirit of antagonism. All of the parties—you must remember, everybody wanted this thing to work. They really wanted this thing to work.*

If you ask me why it worked, it worked because the public wanted it to work. It didn't work because we were fantastic about our logistics. A lot of things went wrong with the logistics, but the people were patient; the people wanted it to work, and in the end the people made it work. And that same spirit carried on through the process within the building itself. All of this was happening between the various parties that were interacting at the time.

One of the things that I think you must bear in mind, which is very different from quite possibly any other situation that you're likely to encounter—originally we spoke about the question of what did we do and how did one manage this question of violence. But I can't really think of parallels with the South African situation in terms of the concept of violence, because our violence was not the same kind of violence that you have in most parts of Africa and other places where these kinds of things happen. It's a very different kind of situation.

You mustn't forget that this was a most unusual situation where the incumbent government decided to relinquish power. That's an almost unheard-of situation. They took a decision which theoretically they could have won of course, but they knew that given the numbers, this was effectively relinquishing power. That was a most unusual situation. There were all sorts of theories as to why they did that; ANC says it's because they forced them to do it, the other guys say whatever. Whatever it is, the fact of the matter is there's probably a little bit of truth in probably all of these speculations. But it was a very unusual situation.

So you didn't go into a situation where you had two sides that were physically at one another's throats, as you might have, for example, in Iraq or something like that, where you've actually got a civil war going on, and now you try to have an election. Well, that's a very different situation. So the fact that we had a bit of violence amongst these Afrikaners who were—and remember, those Afrikaners, the right-wingers who caused that problem, were a very small splinter group. They really were quite frankly irrelevant. That's why it wasn't an issue.

Similarly Natal. It wasn't the whole Zulu nation that came out; it was a small group of people who were actually having local feuds and that sort of stuff going on. So the violence here was actually in overall terms fairly negligible.

MAWSON: But there were thousands of people dying in Natal.

ROSS: *No, it wasn't thousands, for Pete's sake.*

MAWSON: It was—the numbers say it was thousands.

ROSS: *It might have been over a long period of time, it might have been thousands, yes. But not in the—*

MAWSON: No, not in the last.

ROSS: *The violence in Natal, in the tensions between the various parties there, had been going on for a long time, and those numbers could be thousands, you're right. But there has always been a lot of speculation as to exactly what that violence was all about, and there is a strong feeling that a lot of it was not political. That it was really sort of people settling scores amongst one another over issues that had nothing to do with politics.*

I don't know what the correct answer is, but that's the speculation. Certainly as I say, in the run-up to the election it was nowhere near those kinds of numbers.

MAWSON: So maybe my last question—although I think maybe you've already covered this actually. I usually finish these sorts of conversations by asking: why do you think the election was successful. I think you've actually already covered that. You said the people made it a success. Do you think there were any aspects of the way you did the election here that could hold lessons for people in other countries? If you were to give advice to another election administrator in another country, are there any specific things that you would alert them to or tell them about?

ROSS: *I think the important thing—and this may be trite, but there are two different processes, very clearly identifiable processes that make up such an event. The one is a political negotiation, and the other is an administrative application. Don't mix them up. It's as simple as that. If you want the thing to work, you've got to give the thing to mechanics, administrators who can make it work, and you must give them enough freedom to be able to do it. Because if you have too much political interference—and there is always the temptation on the part of the politicians that come in and actually try to manipulate things at the last minute. We had some of that, some of the things I spoke about. It just makes it very, very—in fact, could make it impossible to actually achieve.*

Then at the end, one of the things politicians are very good at is shifting blame. It is never them, it is always somebody else. But in fact, very often it is just because they interfere. They have no sense of the consequences of that

interference. Fortunately we were able to establish a balance. As I say, we were extremely lucky in the choice of the chairman of the IEC. Johann Kriegler is a quietly spoken man—he is a really tough bugger, a seriously tough bugger. He doesn't take nonsense from anybody. He understood his job; he understood that his responsibility was to the public of the country, and he was going to discharge it come hell or high water, and he did it.

If you have somebody in that position that is a weakling, that is going to be prepared to be malleable for any reason, you've had it. You have to have somebody of strength of character and purpose and of competence, intellect, the whole lot.

I've got a very simple philosophy in life. Whatever job you've got, if you have a good person appointed to do it, the chances are that person will succeed, regardless of the problems, because that's what they'll do. They'll do exactly what I've been describing to you. Life never comes at you in a linear kind of fashion; it is always going in a zigzag. You must be able to deal with that. That's what Johann was able to do. As I say, the choice of the people—and also, if I can give it a kind of generic kind of description, you must create an enabling environment for the IEC to operate within. It is no good appointing very good people and then disempowering them by creating a series of regulations or conditions within which they have to work, that make it impossible to work.

I think that that was one of the things that was actually also very important in terms of the integrity with which the South African government at the time, [Frederik Wilhelm] de Klerk's government approached the matter, that did in fact give us that space. They did not try to interfere. Or if they did try to interfere, Johann made sure that they didn't—it never got to me. From where I sat, it did not appear as if they tried to interfere.

There were a number of things that happened. For example, the budget. The budget was a theoretical budget. Somebody sat there on the basis of previous elections and worked out this and that, this is what it should be. Well, in the event, because of all the unknown and unexpected kinds of things, we went considerably over budget. There was a point at which we simply just decided, look, this job is going to be done whatever it costs. If it costs another billion or two, it's just too bad. It is really—in the overall scheme of things, it is irrelevant. Although we did not become reckless as far as the expenditure was concerned, we took the decisions as to what was necessary, and we stopped asking government to give us approval. We just committed the government to whatever.

Somehow or other, I don't know how that worked, but it did.

MAWSON: Before we finish, is there anything else that I haven't touched on that I haven't managed to get with my questions that you think is important?

ROSS: *No, I think we've covered pretty well all that I can contribute. Some of it is useful.*

MAWSON: Most of it. Thank you.

ROSS: *If not useful, at least from an anecdotal point of view, interesting.*

MAWSON: It has been great, thank you very much.

ROSS: *It's a pleasure.*