Facilitation in the public and private sectors, from Ireland to Israel.

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I have operated in government and in the private sector during my working life and have experienced the challenges and opportunities in the resolution of conflict, from the perspectives of both sectors. University, of course, was a wonderful mind-stretching experience for me and taught me to think strategically and to put myself in the minds of those whose thought processes and values are different to my own. My first experience of the practical dynamics of conflict resolution came when, as a national student political leader, I was asked by the British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, to accompany two other colleagues to Dublin in 1971, to seek out members of the nationalist community. The Prime Minister was anxious to know and understand what this community really wanted, what were its priorities and were there opportunities for discussion around these issues. He chose three close lieutenants to undertake this silent approach, all of which was deniable should good faith be broken. Our report back to the Prime Minister, concluded that areas existed, where discussion would be useful and so a silent channel of communication was formed as early as 1971 between the then British Government, the nationalists and their allies.

What I learnt from this exposure, was to be very wary of public postures adopted by protagonists and to steer clear of those who embrace, in private, a set of universal truths, where good contests evil.

In truth, we all operate in an area of grey, where compromise is possible and essential if private discussion, held in good faith, can be established and where protagonists listen to one another directly and understand one another in real terms and not just through public statements, sourced through the medium of third parties. It became clear to me, that political foes can talk in private and in doing so, understand where respective tolerances lie and where progress might be possible. Significantly, I discovered that facilitation requires the suspension of one’s own value system in order to appreciate how others perceive their own reality.

This, my first public sector exposure to the art of facilitation, taught me that no one is in possession the truth, thus making truth relative. I subsequently view the world and the tensions therein, through this prism and this helps to put ideology in perspective and see the world well beyond one’s own socio-economic, political and geographic hinterland. These were important lessons for me later on, when I embarked upon my facilitation work in
South Africa. I have often been asked how it was that a British businessman, working for a British Mining Finance House, domiciled in the United Kingdom, could initiate and chair a secret, private sector, five year process, which contributed to the un-banning of the African National Congress (ANC), the release of Nelson Mandela and the dismantling of Apartheid. In part, my work in government helped me in this task.
I came down from the University of York with an honours degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) with special papers in African Studies. In 1973, I was recruited to work in London, at the Conservative Research Department on the foreign affairs desk, specialising in Africa, the Middle East, oil security and Cyprus. All these areas were those, where Britain had a key bilateral, as well as a global interest. Conservative Research Department then, was the think tank of the Conservative Party and patronized by such luminaries as Rab Butler, Iain Macleod, Ted Heath and Reginald Maudling. Its purpose was to secure the Tory Party in the centre ground of British politics, reinforcing the notion of one nation politics and ensuring that the party was always there for all the people and not just a sectional interest in society, be it business or organized labour.
The Department’s task under the premiership of Edward Heath was to ensure, that the one nation presumption was as little disturbed as possible, when compromise and adjustments to government policy had to be made.
My role on the foreign affairs desk, was to advise the Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister on my areas of responsibility as the price of oil raced upwards and the economy was struggling. In addition, I was responsible for briefing the party in Parliament in the Foreign Affairs Committee, the members of which, on matters relating to Africa, had a propensity to go spectacularly off the rails. Rhodesia and South Africa brought out the worst of the right wing instincts lurking within the party, threatening Britain’s national interests and so had to be managed.
I was at the Department in February 1974, when the government fell following the general election defeat, fought against the backdrop of industrial relations turmoil and economic uncertainty. In February 1975, to my great sadness, Margaret Thatcher replaced Heath as leader of the Party and in 1979, she won the general election to become the Prime Minister. During these intervening years and before I resigned in 1979, I was able to continue to work, in opposition, with Lord Carrington and Geoffrey Rippon, our spokesmen in the Lords and the Commons respectively. In 1974, Heath
and Carrington asked me to visit Portugal in the aftermath of the Revolution, which brought to an end the right wing government of Marcel Caetano. Heath, together with Willie Brandt in Germany and James Callaghan, the new Labour Foreign Secretary, were concerned that the only viable political structures existing in the country, after the revolution, were the communist party cell structures, which had been funded and organised over the years by the Soviet Union. We expected Moscow to exploit this situation to its advantage. The Socialist Party of Mario Soares, linked to the British Labour Party, was in exile in France and we knew, that there was a political vacuum on the ground where the centre of the political spectrum was absent. In conjunction with Callaghan, Brandt and with the knowledge of the US administration, I went to Portugal to identify political figures, who might want to form parties in the vacant centre ground and to help them once identified.

In the immediate chaos of the revolution, I travelled to meet the aging interim Prime Minister, Palma Carlos, to seek out the names of those who might welcome our help. I had met Francisco Sa Carneiro in London, the leader who went on to form the Popular Democrat Party (PPD) and he had given me help whereby I subsequently met Diogo Freitas do Amaral and Adelino Amaro da Costa, the leaders to be of the Centro Democratico and Social Party (CDS). Having identified the political players, Callaghan helped with the provision of organizational skills for Mario Soares and PS, the Germans helped with money for the formation of CDS and PPD and we provided organization skills, communication techniques and other logistical support for the launch to these two parties. This was done explicitly to ensure, that the Portuguese people had real choices available to them, after decades of authoritarian rule.

Election rallies and meetings were often broken up by violent armed groups and on one occasion Geoffrey Rippon and I, accompanied by the British Ambassador, had to protest to the Portuguese President Costa Gomes, when a CDS congress was besieged by an angry mob of communist party supporters in Oporto. The President listened to us carefully and asked his ADC to investigate the matter, although we were not at all certain that the Portuguese Government was in control of its armed forces or the civil police authorities. In the event, the siege of the congress was lifted and all the delegates, including some foreign members of parliament, were allowed to leave unharmed.
I spent two subsequent Portuguese elections attached to the staff of the leader of CDS, Diogo Freitas do Amaral, thereby sending a clear signal, that the western world was interested in the safety and well being of this leadership and political party. From this silent public sector initiative I learnt, that a variety of competing domestic and overseas interests had to be identified, understood, harnessed and coordinated, if the Portuguese people were to have real choices available to them in their post revolutionary political and constitutional structures. At home, it was necessary to forge cross party alliances, so that the UK could react as one to this changed European dynamic and that this whole, should identify other foreign interested parties in order to construct a European response to this European issue. The US administration was an interested observer to this initiative and was supportive of our efforts, largely because of the cold war implications of Portugal becoming a client state of the Soviet Union.

Some of these same elements were present and brought into play when, in November 1975, General Franco of Spain died and I undertook a similar mission in Spain, via the good offices of Manuel Fraga, a former minister and then Spanish Ambassador to the Court of St James. During this process, in London and Madrid, I met with a variety of political individuals as well as an aide to Prince Juan Carlos, later to become King of Spain. We were of help in the development of the Partido Popular under the leadership of Jose Maria Aznar. Again, domestic cross party alliances were critical in the formation of a wider set of political alliances, ultimately designed to give the Spanish choice at the ballot box following the fall of the dictatorship.

In May 1979, Margaret Thatcher won the British General Election to become Prime minister of the United Kingdom. Having survived a series of confrontations with her on policy, I knew that my time as a member of the Conservative Party was coming to an end. We disagreed over Rhodesia, where she wanted to recognize Bishop Muzorewa as the leader of the majority population; over South Africa, where her opposition to sanctions was taken as approval of the apartheid state and gave comfort to Pretoria and in the Middle East, where her views on the good guys and the bad guys, marginalized our capacity to build bridges and generally poorly served the country’s best interests. I could not work within the same political structure as one whose views on universal truth, made a nonsense of my own world view. I subsequently began conversations with the leader of the Liberal Democrat Party, whose approach to life was closer to my own than
was hers and whose attitude towards gender and sexual equality broke new ground, which was to eventually lead to a radical change in the Law relating to the age of consent and homosexual reform. I felt it important not just to resign, but to join with others in resisting this political expression of intolerance. Accordingly, I resigned from the Conservative Party, joined the Liberal Democrat Party and was selected as my party’s prospective parliamentary candidate for the constituency of Penrith and the Border. I became the challenger to Willie Whitelaw, Thatcher’s deputy, in time for the approaching General Election in June 1983. Whitelaw defeated me with a majority of 15421 votes, but as we suspected, Thatcher put Whitelaw into the House of Lords shortly thereafter, thereby causing a by election in the July of the same year. This resulted in my reducing the Tory majority to 552. Close, but not close enough and so in 1987, I fought for my party on the Isle of Wight, but with a growing economy, a weak opposition and in my party, a divided leadership, Thatcher reigned supreme and drove all before her in that election, including me!

Following my resignation from the Conservative Research Department in 1977, I had been recruited by the Chief Executive of the British Mining Finance House, Consolidated Gold Fields, to act as his political and economic advisor. The company had been founded in 1887 by the Victorian entrepreneur, Cecil Rhodes, to fund the development of the newly discovered gold reefs in the Transvaal in South Africa. In 1977 the Group comprised three wholly owned subsidiary companies, Amey Roadstone Corporation Ltd., (ARC), Gold Fields of South Africa and ARC America. The Group derived the lion’s share of its income and value from the company in South Africa and thus the political and economic dynamics of that country and the company’s position within it, was critically important to the Board of Directors and the shareholders. My function was to provide a picture of economic and political reality, which in effect, challenged received wisdom within this highly conservative business. Simply, I saw my role to the Board, as the man to think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable and as such, found myself at odds with the general direction of thought within the business. For example, received wisdom suggested that the South African authorities could sit on the general state of political and economic unrest within the country, for at least twenty years and that radical reform was not imperative and in any event, was not the company’s business. The business community, at home and abroad, thought that
enlightened business would promote black bursaries, which in turn and over

time, would generate a black middle class with an interest in the well being

of the State and of the role of private enterprise in the mix. I heard this

message which had considerable currency amongst the more liberal minded

businesses in the UK and in the USA. This view was also shared by our

competitor and rival in South Africa, the Anglo American Corporation,

whose Chairman, Harry Oppenheimer, was in South African terms, a liberal

minded gradualist. His colleagues at the time record this, in Rex Gibson’s

book, Battlefields of Gold. Certainly, by the standards of the management of

our South African subsidiary company, he was a liberal minded man who

promoted black educational opportunities where ever he could. To me,

however, this approach seemed like a treatment for the symptoms of the

problem and not a remedy for its cause. In this educational proposition, the

South African authorities would only permit this type of intervention in the

private sector and the vast bulk of black children were educated in the public

sector, making any positive impact small and perhaps divisive.

I took the view that the central issue was that of universal suffrage and any

resource we had should be directed towards that end. This, however,

required a political stance being taken and one which relegated remedial

actions, designed to show an oblique corporate awareness of the inequality

of the system. I believed that the entire system was unsustainable and that if

my company wanted a long term relationship with South Africa, this issue

had to be grasped. My problem was that I worked for a conservative

financial institution, which only partly controlled it’s South African

subsidiary and one which was even more conservative than the parent

company. Further, in those days in the UK, Boards of Directors could make

party political donations without shareholder approval and my Chairman

authorized a substantial donation to the Conservative Party each year. He

was himself close to Prime Minister Thatcher and was a regular visitor to

Number 10 Downing Street, where attitudes to South Africa were very

different to my own.

I set myself the task of persuading my chairman to allow me to pursue a

political course, of establishing contact with the ANC in exile in order to see

what its agenda might be and if there was a possibility of working with it, in

order to bring about substantive change in the country. My task was made

somewhat easier when the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee

met the ANC in Parliament, where the ANC could put their case
directly to British politicians, despite Thatcher’s objection to “talking with terrorists”. My chairman was nervous about this explicit political proposition but recognized the worsening state of affairs in South Africa, where the State of Emergency was becoming increasingly draconian, investors were leaving the country and some domestic South African business leaders had met the ANC in Lusaka. This group was led by Gavin Relly of the Anglo American Corporation, who by that time, was an unwelcome presence on our Board of Directors. My chairman, after repeated requests from me and despite opposition from within the Board, not least from the man to whom I reported, agreed to my request. He did warn me, that if my initiative became public I would be denounced and sacked for acting beyond my responsibility.

During my time in politics, I had become friends with the late Anthony Samson, the writer and political thinker and I knew from him that he was seeking to introduce the ANC leadership to captains of industry in the UK, whose companies held significant investments in South Africa. In the book, Oliver Tambo Remembered, edited by J Pallo Jordan, I set down in my chapter, Building a Bridge, the details of my first encounter with the ANC leadership and I list the attendees at Anthony Samson’s London home. At this meeting on 24th October 1986 I was the junior businessman present at this gathering of the great and good, which I attended on behalf of Consolidated Gold Fields, the other attendees being chairmen or chief executives of their respective companies. Oliver Tambo the head of the ANC was accompanied by Thabo Mbeki, Mac Maharaj, Aziz Pahad and Jacob Zuma, the key leadership in exile. Listening and talking to these men, it became clear to me that it would be possible for us to work together in order to help bring about a fundamentally changed political dispensation.

When the meeting finished and the other guests had departed, I approached Oliver Tambo to ask what a British company could do to make a difference in South Africa. Tambo waited some while before replying and then asked me to help build a bridge to Pretoria, since some form of communication was vital if the ANC and the South African Government were not to continue to speak past each other.

This was an extraordinary request, for although I was mandated to attend the meeting, I had no mandate to offer the services of the company in what was an explicit political role. Having determined, however, that this was the high road, which the company should take, I needed to prepare a rationale and
proposition to sell to my chairman. The plan I devised was for a company funded facilitation role, which would bring the ANC together with, as yet, unidentified players, from within the Afrikaner community in South Africa, who enjoyed very close links to the government in Pretoria. The Afrikaner community by now had secured the heights of economic dominance as well as controlling the political process. The ideological and philosophical heartland of Afrikanerdom was to be found at the University of Stellenbosch, but as a British company, our links historically with this constituency were non-existent. Worse, the Afrikaner still remembered the Boer War, when the British military created camps into which they placed a disaffected Boer population. These concentration camps had left an indelible mark on the mind set of the Afrikaner towards the English, which extends to this day and Consolidated Gold Fields, established by Cecil Rhodes, could not have been more British. I too, am an Englishman and so we had a hard furrow to plough, if I was to secure the trust and the participation of this constituency.

For reasons unknown to me, the director to whom I reported, had engaged the services of a journalist from the Afrikaner community, Fleur de Villiers, who also worked as a consultant to our competitor, Anglo American. This connection made me apprehensive. Nevertheless, given her links with Afrikanerdom, I approached her to ask where I might begin my task of making contact with those close to the South African Government but not part of it. She directed me to Willie Esterhuysen, professor of philosophy at Stellenbosch University who had, of late, distanced himself from the National Party leadership of President PW Botha, but who still retained close links to the establishment and its political, intelligence and military apparatus. So I set off on my silent mission, to find key players from within the country who were flexible enough to talk to the ANC. I needed those who retained sufficient capacity to influence their community and to use the exposure they gained, to persuade those in control in Government of the merit of talks. This secret process had to be undertaken without the knowledge of our subsidiary company and so I was released from my day to day responsibilities in London to see if I could find those who would be prepared to talk to the ANC, a banned organization in South Africa and one denounced as a communist front organization of terrorists at home and abroad. I also needed to avoid the attention of the secret police who were very aware of those who advocated dialogue with “the enemy” and who were not given to charity, when such people were discovered especially, if
they were foreigners. Phone lines were tapped, the media controlled and informers were well paid to ensure that the security apparatus had sufficient information to keep it on top of its job.

Earlier, and running in parallel with these strategic steps, the Group had begun the process of diversification, both by geography and by product and had acquired aggregate and quarry businesses in the UK and the USA. In addition, it was developing its mineral business in Australia. This strategic diversification had not escaped the attention of the group’s competitor, the Anglo American Corporation, which shortly after I had joined the Group, launched a dawn raid on the Company’s stock. On the 12th February 1980, a raid on the shares was launched, securing 27% of the total stock by an undeclared entity. This raid ignored entirely, British legal requirements that obliged authors to disclose their activities, if they bought more than 5% of the equity of a business. Later De Beers agreed that it had breached the rule, but argued that it done so inadvertently in order to protect the independence of Gold Fields of South Africa. From April 1980, we had to learn to live with this unwanted Anglo American presence on our share register and on our Board, De Beers being part of that Group and the vehicle for the raid.

The year before, the General Election had returned Mrs Thatcher to government, on a promise to radically cut back on public expenditure. To me this meant that the bulk of our aggregate business would suffer, since the customer base comprised large local authorities and nationally funded road projects. I engineered my transfer to ARC in order to rethink the business strategy and reposition the company away from public expenditure based work, to activity such as house building, which was funded by the private sector. My work applied to our US businesses as well, as it had implications for the way in which our stock was valued and traded on the market in the United States.

I was also aware that our quarries and sand and gravel pits were big employers in the constituencies of many members of Parliament and as such, we needed to develop relationships with these legislators, if our commercial interests were to be properly recognized, in the face of public expenditure cuts and the possibility of job loses. Equally, I was aware that if Anglo American were to seek to increase its shareholding in the parent company, I would need the legislators to be aware of the consequences of such an eventuality. I therefore built a set of strategic relationships with all of those members of parliament in whose constituencies we traded and in each plant, a unit was charged specifically with developing this corporate relationship
with these parliamentarians over the long term. I further, encouraged our US business to do the same and become close to those in Congress to whom we could turn in times of trouble. This time of trouble was not long in coming when in 1987, Anglo American made a full bid for the company via a structure called Minorco.

Two years before however, I had returned to the parent company to undertake my strategic initiative in South Africa and the secret talks were underway by this time. Sampie Terreblanche and Willie Esterhuysen of Stellenbosch University had accepted my invitation to attend the talks, together with Willie Breytenbach, a defence specialist and a man close to the military in South Africa. The first meeting was scheduled for 31st October 1987 at the Compleat Angler in Marlow near London, the venue reflecting my chairman’s nervousness at holding the meetings at our corporate retreat, Mells Park. Equally, for some unspecified reason the, ANC were not able to field the A team from Lusaka for meeting, but instead send a variety of exiles based in London, who nevertheless were lead by Aziz Pahad. The agenda had been agreed by both sides and was general in its nature, relating to the domestic situation in the country, the economy and the release of political prisoners. I was concerned that the Afrikaners would see this second division team as an indication that Tambo was not taking the process seriously, or that I had over sold the importance which the ANC leadership placed on the initiative. In any event, the first meeting was tense and I had to lead the conversation in a highly directional manner, which I did not want to see repeated. After all, this was their issue and their agenda.

After a good dinner and some sleep, the session the following day went better than I could have hoped. What this first meeting showed was the need both sides had in getting to know and understand each other better and at the end of the weekend, I had little difficulty in persuading both sides that a second, but properly attended meeting, was important. I would broker the agenda directly with Oliver Tambo in London and would travel to South Africa to meet the Afrikaners to secure their input. Such a process was necessary, given that telephone lines from the UK to South Africa were tapped and that security and silence were of great importance. Furthermore, the Bureau of State Security had penetrated the London offices of the ANC such that I needed to meet Aziz Pahad for talks in a variety of locations.

Out second meeting was scheduled for 21st and 22nd February 1988 and was held in Eastwell Manor in Kent. Again, this reflected my chairman’s
reluctance to let me use Mells Park House as a venue because he feared too direct an association with the process. I was thus obliged to find a different, but necessarily, more public venue. Security became an issue for me since, as he promised, Oliver Tambo had beefed up the ANC delegation to include Thabo Mbeki, his deputy, Aziz Pahad, Wally Serote and Tony Trew, whose meticulous note taking was, together with my own, key in keeping a clear record of what was said and agreed at our meetings. Esterhuyse and Terreblanche again led the internal team but which included this time, constitutional expert, Marinus Wiechers and Wimpie de Klerk, brother of FW de Klerk. Esterhuyse had told myself and Thabo that Neil Barnard, head of National intelligence Service, on being briefed about our first meeting, had suggested that he should attend future meetings. I was clear that Barnard was briefing PW Botha, but was concerned that his presence may have an inhibiting impact upon the growing chemistry between the attendees. It was however, a matter for the Afrikaners to decide upon but in the event, neither Barnard nor any of his people ever attended our meetings. Consequently, Esterhuyse became the indirect conduit with the Head of State.

The atmosphere at our second meeting was cordial, but distinctly more purposeful than our first meeting and we worked around the theme of “creating the climate for change”. This theme encompassed strategies for negotiations; obstacles to creating a conducive climate: white aspirations and black fears and the mechanisms necessary for driving political transition. Throughout all our discussions, the topics of unbanning the ANC, releasing political prisoners including Nelson Mandela, the maintenance of law and order and the nature of any future constitutional, political process and economy, were always yardsticks against which we could measure progress or the lack of it. As the personal chemistry between the two sides developed and warmed, I saw the group behaving as South Africans together, dealing with their collective problems and issues. I was the outsider who would receive the handshake at the beginning and at the end of our sessions, whilst the South Africans would warmly embrace one another. This told me that they were now beginning to own the process and I thought that I did not need to worry that I had to persuade them to meet again in the future!
In this context, I became a non executive chairman, agenda broker and sometime problem fixer, when positions seemed deadlocked.
The third meeting was held at Mells Park House on 21st and 22nd August 1988 and the venue ensured privacy and comfort as we tackled the more intractable issues head on. This was a difficult meeting since it was the first gathering since the ANC Krugersdorp bombing in March, when three civilians were killed and twenty two were wounded. I had spent time in South Africa persuading the Afrikaners to honour the August date at Mells Park. They were under great pressure to withdraw from the process. Equally, I had to explain to the ANC, how dangerously close we were to the process becoming grounded.
The Afrikaners and the ANC did arrive. At a somewhat tense meeting, I asked Thabo Mbeki to set out what had happened at Krugersdorp, why civilians were killed in what was clearly not a military target. Their strategy dictated that targets should relate to military or governmental facilities. To my great surprise, Mbeki took the brave decision to describe the command and control structure of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the movement, as it selected the targets for its bombing campaign. Mbeki explained, that the targets were set in Lusaka at ANC headquarters. The messages relating to the targets was conveyed by word of mouth, via many mouths, over many miles, until it reached its destination. He explained that this made targeting very imprecise, with the human capacity for error ever present. The message on Krugersdorp had been misheard and misunderstood by the time it reached South Africa from Zambia, via the underground network of runners. He apologized for the mistake, but left the audience in no doubt how these errors had been made.
The Afrikaners were silent, realizing that Mbeki, in an act of great trust and honesty, had effectively explained a weaknesses of the military command and control structure. This message was not lost on the Afrikaners present neither was it on their interlocutors in Pretoria. A serious bond of trust had just been built by the ANC as a result of Thabo’s decision. Willie Esterhuyse earlier decision, to identify the route he used to the President, using Neil Barnard, had also done much to promote a mood of reciprocal trust. From that moment on, I never had to fear for the talks taking their natural course. My non executive role was broadened when colleagues asked me to lead on the context setting of our talks, by explaining the attitudes of the British Government toward South Africa, other EU governments, the
Commonwealth, the US administration and what was happening to the Soviet view on proxy engagements, as the Cold War was coming to an end. In subsequent meetings, this atmosphere of trust was further developed, when the Afrikaners talked openly about change within the National Party, PW Botha’s health and the challengers to succeed him. The ANC shared openly their perspective on the changing dynamics within the region, within the frontline states. Both sides now began to fully understand one another and their respective tolerances.

During the intervening months, the colleagues asked me to approach Mrs Thatcher to see if she would play a rather more constructive role in the region. Given my resignation from the Conservative Party and my subsequent challenge to her as a Liberal Democrat, I felt that her agreeing to see me was remote, but I agreed to try. She refused to see me, but asked her chief of staff, Charles Powell, to meet me instead. I was able to brief him on our work and to ask that the strident noises from the Prime Minister about the ANC, sanctions, and her acrimonious attitude towards other Commonwealth heads of government, should be tempered, since they were often misinterpreted by Pretoria as signals of support and they also caused anger and confusion in the region. Thatcher’s response to me was that she was not prepared to deal with terrorists and she regarded the ANC just as she viewed the IRA and the PLO. In this way, she put herself beyond the role she had sought for herself, as the global facilitator on South Africa. In my view, she demonstrated again, her poor understanding of what was happening in the world around her, because of her intolerance of others and her belief in the rightness of her own cause.

I met too, with the US State Department, to see if they might assist in the ordered process of change. My meeting with the Assistant Secretary for Africa, was of value only in that it showed that, like the British Foreign Office, it too had been marginalized by the ideologues in the White House, led by Chester Crocker. In any event, my conclusion was that South Africa did not register highly on the US Richter scale of key jurisdictions and events there were best left to Margaret Thatcher and her relationship with the leadership in Pretoria. Her assumed role, as seen by Moscow and Washington had been compromised by her own world view and her foolish dismissal of the ANC.
In truth, Thatcher hated to be contradicted by others and especially, by her Ministers in Cabinet. In truth, she was largely unrestrained at home and abroad. There was only one individual however, who could cause the Prime Minister to think again and that was her Sovereign. I believe that it was a quiet word from the Queen, whom she held in high regard, that led to Thatcher’s strident rhetoric in relation to sanctions and the Commonwealth, being toned down. We see in this, the positive impact of a cosmopolitan, thoughtful and experienced Monarch, upon an intemperate and ideologically driven politician. We in the UK, have reason to be grateful for this effective check against unbridled political ambition and hubris.

The seventh meeting at Mells Park took place from 10-13 February 1990 and followed, within days, of FW de Klerk’s historic speech at the opening of Parliament in Cape Town on 2nd February 1990. In it, the President recognized that negotiations were critical to establishing a new political order based on reconciliation. To achieve this, he lifted the ban on the ANC, the PAC and the South African Communist Party and released all political prisoners associated with them, including Nelson Mandela. He abolished emergency regulations controlling the media and lifted regulations that restricted 33 other organizations. He noted the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War.

The scenario he outlined mirrored exactly the discussions and agreements we had made in our secret talks at Mells Park and reflected the discussions held by Nelson Mandela in prison, to which we were party. We all felt a great sense of achievement and pride. Friendships had been formed over the two years we had spent together. During a relaxing dinner on our first evening on the 10th February, the issue of the British rebel cricket tour of South Africa led by Mike Gatting was raised. It had caused mass demonstrations and threatened the wider progress set out by the South African Government. The ANC suggested that if the tour was stopped, it would send a message to its people to cease the boycott. The white South Africans present, had the capacity to stop the tour, since they had financed it. So it was agreed that evening, that the rebel team would play one more match and return home and the ANC would demobilize. This happened on script and showed how influential both sides, Afrikaner and ANC, were in resolving issues many miles away. The following day Thabo Mbeki and the ANC team arranged for a positive response to be made to De Klerk’s speech. But later that day, Mbeki received a coded message from South Africa that Nelson Mandela would be released the following day.
Mandela had refused to be released on the 10th February, since he wanted a clear indication from De Klerk that all political prisoners would be released as well. He wanted a weeks delay but eventually agreed to be released from Victor Vester prison on 11 February 1990. All of us watched the release on television live from South Africa, including the members of Mells Park staff who had looked after us so well over the years. We were all deeply moved. Our task was now coming to its end.

There had been casualties en route, not least for Consolidated Gold Fields and for me personally. Whilst conducting these secret talks, I had become increasingly frustrated with my future role within the business. My practical reporting line had been to my Chairman, though my formal reporting line was to the main board Director of Public Affairs. He was responsible for directing the political structures, which I had devised and put in place, in the event of a full bid for the company by Anglo American Corporation, which I assumed would come at some point. It did come during our talks and I had expected a robust reaction from the company.

I had asked my Chairman, prior to this, if he had a place for me on the main Board of directors before I had to make a decision on an job offer I had received from another major Corporation. He told me that he would not be able to make these changes at this time, so I tended my resignation and joined the other company within weeks before the bid was launched. On my departure, Rudolph Agnew and I agreed, that I would continue to chair the talks and that the company would continue to fund them.

The bid was resisted and despite being a senior member of another company, I returned privately, to help in this resistance, by directing those political structures I had put in place in the UK and the USA and by using my commercial and political networks, to help see off the intrusion.

In 1988, we succeeded and the bid collapsed, but so weakened had Consolidated Gold Fields become, that when Hanson Trust approached the company later that year, neither management nor shareholders had the will to resist further, much to my personal sadness. The Board accepted the Hanson bid and so began the balkanization of Consolidate Gold Fields. This type of asset stripping was fashionable at the time but later on rejected, as viable businesses were sacrificed on the altar on quick profit taking.

The talks at Mells Park were reaching their last but critically important stage and it was vital that I should persuade Lord Hanson to honour the obligation of Consolidated Gold Fields in financing the talks as the company was in the process of being broken up and the assets sold off. After some difficulty and
delay, Lord Hanson agreed to continue the funding for a fixed period, but I was left with a shortfall for the purchase of air tickets and ancillary costs. I then approached two friends in the City, Sir Colin Marshall of British Airways and the Chairman of Standard Chartered Bank, Sir Patrick Gillam to bridge the funding gap. Both responded positively, the gap was bridged and the work continued without the initiative becoming stalled or becoming public knowledge, which were two of my great concerns.

Our final Mells Park meeting, the eighth, was held from 28 to 30 June 1990 and for the first time was attended by a senior government minister, Dawie de Villiers, Minister of Minerals and Energy Affairs as well as National Party leader of the Cape Province. The meeting concentrated on delays in the negotiating process, increasing levels of violence, the nature of the post apartheid economy, the transitional government between the ANC and the National Party, and constitutional process. These were deeply significant discussions and showed just how much progress we had made but how much more work still needed to be done, not least in reinforcing the good faith upon which all our secret talks had been built. I was concerned that our effective channel of communication should not be abandoned until such time as we had effectively translated this good faith into the formal negotiating process. I therefore suggested that another meeting be held in South Africa, in order to be sure that what we had built, was safely transferred to the formal negotiation process, before we disband.

My great regret was that Consolidated Gold Fields had perished before it could witness the successful conclusion of our efforts in 1991 as we held our last meeting in South Africa. The formal and public negotiations were by then, very effectively taking place between the Government of the Republic of South Africa and the ANC under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki. Of equal regret to me and colleagues was that Oliver Tambo, who has suffered a stroke and was to die on the 2nd May 1993, before he could witness the real fruits of his prodigious efforts. By the time of his funeral which I attended in South Africa, I was entirely satisfied that our process had come to its successful conclusion and that the formal negotiations were very much on track and that our role was over.

I was privileged and proud to attend the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first president of a democratic South Africa on 10 May 1994 and to witness, Thabo Mbeki being sworn in as first deputy president and FW de Klerk his second deputy president. It had been a rare privilege for me to have participated in such a significant historical moment and one I won’t
forget. I reflected on a moment when the private sector had taken a courageous decision to help facilitate, in a most political manner, where commercial lines of command and control were precise short and tight and where I had the capacity to focus directly on the issues at hand and did not need to worry about shifting politics and personalities, implicit in a public sector intervention.

My original detailed papers of the Mells Park Process are kept at the Borthwick Institute for Archives at the University of York, a seat of learning to which I owe much and copies lodged with the Mandela Foundation in South Africa, in memory of a man to whom we all owe much. I believe our secret talks were important in bringing about ordered change in South Africa, most particularly because they were secret, constructed around regular meetings based on an agreed agenda, owned by the participants who were individuals of courage and vision. This, in no way, minimises the importance of other meetings held at the time in Lusaka, Dakar or elsewhere, all of which played a real role in making the notion of talking amongst protagonists, something which was not to viewed as disreputable. Our process, however, got down into the detail of where people stood, on what issues, on what was possible, what was more difficult and what might be a deal breaker. Ours was a process and was not constructed around just a one off public meetings. It represented a silent, secure, sustained and ordered attempt to allow the protagonists to get to know each other over time, explore issues and to own what was their problem and to manage it forward.

In his book, Insurgent Diplomat, published in 2014, Aziz Pahad sets out for the first time the ANC view of the talks, the issues resolved and their relevance to the process of change. In it he says “we were all convinced that the meetings had been invaluable”. Willie Esterhuyse’s view was that “they helped create the conditions for negotiations” and amounted to “a dress rehearsal for the peace talks”. He summed it up when he said “It was the most liberating experience of my life”. Pahad concludes that until Mells Park, there had been no direct contact between people close to the establishment, on the one hand, who then went back to report to principals and people close to the ANC leadership, on the other, reporting back to their leadership.

What did I learn from this exciting element in my life? First, a facilitator must always remember that the process is not about him but about the
owners of the issue. This means, he puts aside his own subjectivities and
tries to see matters through the eyes of the owners of the issue. This
means remaining silent when necessary (which is often), but being
prepared and capable of intervention when required. Before, during and after
the process, the facilitator must keep his counsel and avoid the public
spotlight. Second, his function is to provide a safe and secure venue where
those invited can come and be themselves, without fear or favour. Third, the
composition of the group must be carefully selected. I chose those, not at the
apex of their respective structures, and those with flexibility of mind yet
ability to argue and deliver a difficult course back within their organization.
Fourth, secrecy is vital if players are to behave naturally, without fearing
that their private thoughts will be leaked to others and be used against them.
In this operation there were many potential “spoilers” whose agenda’s may
be self interested and where knowledge and publicity would allow them to
cause the participant to behave in a tribal fashion. Fifth, trust and confidence
has to be built into the process and I took the view that getting the group to
behave as South Africans together, was an early prize. Once they did that,
the facilitator becomes less relevant and ownership of the process passes
from him to them, where it must reside if the initiative is to succeed. Sixth,
when the process is concluded, the facilitator remains silent unless asked to
do otherwise by the owners of the process. It was only when Thabo Mbeki
asked me the “write the final chapter” that I talked about the process with
Robert Harvey who wrote his definitive study, The Fall of Apartheid from
Smuts to Mbeki. Indeed, I declined an earlier offer of an award for my work
from the then British Prime Minister, John Major. I did so on the grounds
that I did not want to do anything which would make the job of Nelson
Mandela as President and Thabo Mbeki as deputy President any more
difficult, by drawing attention to an historical process, when they were
grappling with life and death issues, such as, putting power and water into
the townships, job creation and dealing with the Aids pandemic.