

Interview with Gavin Woods

'Either we stand up for the rights of Parliament against the executive or we are

seen to give in and fail'

As chairman of the standing committee on public accounts (Scopa) during the row over the inquiry into the R43bn arms contract, you have been under enormous pressure. Is this the toughest thing you have ever faced?

No. I contracted polio when only a few months old and had to fight against a very difficult physical condition all my life. My whole right side was affected so that my right leg dragged and was shorter than the left leg. Similarly my right arm is only 20 per cent effective and I've always had back problems. This had the effect of having me overdevelop my left side, which caused a lot of wear and tear, exacerbated when I was young by all sorts of accidents including climbing and motor bike accidents as well as a lot of fights at school. By the time I was 16 I had spent four whole years in hospital, including two stretches of a year each. Mind you, my family was very poor so hospital was an eye opener: three square meals a day!

Recently I had growing difficulty with my physical condition. My right leg had to be amputated 18 months ago and I've had a series of other operations as well. Now I'm off crutches and feeling better than I have for a long time.

What is your family background?

I was born in Durban in 1947, but when I was three the family moved to Estcourt because my older brother (I'm the second of eight children) had very bad asthma and the climate was better there. My father was a poor white English-speaker while my

mother was of Huguenot stock. My father lacked education but was an autodidact. He was an introspective, philosophical man who - atypically for a poor white - joined the Liberal Party. He enjoyed the conversations he had there but found the people intellectually pretentious. I think he felt very lonely: they were mainly academics and upper income people. So he left and became a founder member of the Federal Party and later on a founder member of the Progressive Party. I can remember the Prog leader, Jan Steytler, coming to our house since we were the only members in a 20-mile radius. But my father was not a socially confident man: what he liked in politics was sitting in smoke-filled rooms as an election worker. He was always a liberal, but in some ways he was also more of a socialist, even a communist. He understood the need for state intervention and wanted to see wealth redistribution. Naturally, I was deeply influenced by him.

What other influences did you experience?

I was brought up as a Catholic and I still am Catholic in spirit although probably not a Catholic in the way the church understands. I was very influenced by the priests. Some were very open-minded and humanitarian.

Was your disability a great handicap at school?

Yes. I often felt great resentment and anger over it. On two occasions faith-healing preachers came and pitched their tents in our neighbourhood and my father came to me with big eyes and said, "You know they're making people walk who couldn't walk before and even some of the blind can see after going on that big tent crusade. Do you want to give it a try?" I got terribly excited both times and imagined myself healed and playing rugby the next day. When nothing happened I felt terrible anger and disappointment. I tried to play sport at school but I had only walked for the first time at age five and I'd always get injured. I used to get involved in fights a lot too. I was a difficult child, in a quiet rage against my fate. I had a tremendous determination to

succeed, and in an odd way I always had a sense of destiny, a feeling that one day I would do something really important.

Was your disability ever an advantage?

It was character building. For example, as kids we would go fruit stealing at night and then everyone would run away and I would be left to face the angry farmer. I would have to explain and talk myself out of it because I couldn't run away. I learnt a great deal from that. Also kids are very cruel: I was bullied, made fun of and spat on. I had to take all of that. I nurtured the idea that I would do medicine and became a missionary doctor in Africa but of course my grades weren't very good. My disability meant I was unable to sit down for some years - which didn't make studying easy. Finally my father said, "Well I was hoping the penny would drop. I can't possibly afford to send you to a trade school, let alone university." So I got a job in a bank and hated it.

How did you make your way up?

I've always read a lot and so I registered for an accounting degree: it was what I was doing at the bank anyway. Then I went youth hostelling overseas and saw the world. I came back to South Africa in 1971 all fired up and determined to do something against apartheid. I got a bank job in Margate, but in my spare time began to teach arithmetic to black kids. The security police did not like this and hauled me in. Many of the other bank workers were police reservists and they hated me. I had an evening job playing a guitar and singing in local hotels along with blacks. I associated with blacks and had leftwing views. In an ultra conservative place like Margate this inevitably meant a lot of police harassment. One of the reservists in the bank warned me that the police were going to plant dagga in my flat and pin a charge on me. Early next morning I gave some passing African workers the key to the flat and told them they could take anything they found. Then I tossed a coin to decide whether to go north or south. It was south, so I trekked all the way down the coast through Pondoland and the Transkei to

Cape Town. I had no money and had to sleep on the beach. I got attacked by dogs that ripped my trousers and had other adventures. In Cape Town I applied for a job with Trust Bank but was rejected on the grounds that "a cripple doesn't suit our public image". That hurt.

I became a clerk with a paint company and got mixed up with a Jewish post-graduate group at the University of Cape Town. They had the same leftwing opinions as I did, but they were all very wealthy and much better educated which made me feel resentful again at my own lack of education. I returned to Durban, met my wife Patricia - we have four children - and did some accountancy diplomas, eventually drifting into a job as a researcher in advertising. That's how I discovered that I really enjoyed research. Gradually I managed to do a BA by correspondence, then an honours degree. One day I was asked whether I would like to use my research skills at the Inkatha Institute. I had always been pro-ANC and wasn't sure about Inkatha, but I read Chief Buthelezi's speeches and felt "I can live with that all right." I was appointed deputy director and later became director.

That must have been a very isolated position.

Indeed. Especially during the violence in the 1980s, it was utterly traumatic. Worst of all for me was the propaganda war against the IFP that was so mad and unreasoning. I felt very indignant at the unfair way in which Chief Buthelezi was treated. At the same time I enjoyed the work. I managed simultaneously to do an MA and then a PhD in Germany. I was always hoping for an academic job one day.

When did you become an MP?

I was only put on the IFP list on the very last day in 1994, when Joe Matthews, a senior party official, said, "where is Gavin Woods then?" When I was elected I felt I ought to try to make a difference to peoples' lives. In fact Parliament was very disillusioning; I'm not sure how much longer I would have stayed. But in 1999 the ANC

decided that it didn't want to give the Democratic Party either of the two opposition chairmanships of standing committees and that they should go to the IFP instead. Hence my chairmanship of the standing committee on public accounts (Scopa). It's a full time job. My DP predecessor, Ken Andrew, had said "never again" - the load was just too much. But I have devoted myself to it body and soul and I've been able to use all my accounting and research skills. Scopa is the very essence of Parliament: we monitor how the government spends the taxpayers' money. I'm very proud of the spirit of unity and consensus we have developed as a committee and how we wrote the new Public Finance Management Act. The first thing we did was to say that Khulekani Sithole, the national director of prisons, had to be removed from office. The ANC might have found it easier because he came under an IFP minister, Ben Skosana. But that should have been a warning to them, that we had no fear or favour when it came to party.

Given the enormous ANC pressure that has been exerted on members of Scopa, how did it manage to adopt a report unanimously and get it through Parliament in the first place?

First of all we had a very good, hard-working committee and we were lucky enough to have some very fine ANC colleagues, including Laloo Chiba and Billy Nair, both of whom have very distinguished histories in the struggle and were on Robben Island. Andrew Feinstein is also a man of great probity and intelligence. We always managed to work as a team and to do things by consensus. We received a great deal of information about the alleged arms contract corruption - boxes and boxes full of material - and we did our work very thoroughly and conscientiously. Finally we met to consider the draft report and I accepted whatever amendments were suggested. The ANC leadership may not have realised the full implications of our work at that stage. Our report was put down as the 14th order out of 15 on the last day of Parliament and passed on the nod. It was only later when the media reported that we wanted a full-scale investigation, including the

Heath special investigating unit (SIU), that the ANC leadership seems to have panicked. They had a series of frantic meetings then and all sorts of measures were taken to try to negate our report.

What was the role of the Speaker in these measures?

Frene Ginwala has spent a great deal of time, the effect of which weakened Scopa's position. She also claimed that Scopa had exceeded its authority. On her insistence I drafted a letter to the investigators saying that Scopa is required to stand back from the investigation. She then insisted that the letter go even further and even wrote down what she wanted it to say. I took her notes and agreed to consider it. I still have her notes. Under the pressure I felt, I accepted her suggestions, even though there was no doubt that the main thrust was to try to change Scopa's approach to the matter.

Why should four cabinet ministers have held a press conference to denounce Scopa?

That was quite ridiculous. They tried to insist that we were amateurs who didn't understand, but the opposite is the case. I think we know a great deal more about key financial aspects of the arms deal than they do. Journalists told me they had never seen Alec Erwin look as nervous as during that press conference. I suppose the executive wants to involve as many ministers as possible in backing up its case.

The executive has been so determined to quash this inquiry that it has been willing to undermine the credibility of key institutions. Some people have even begun to wonder about the integrity of the Constitutional Court decision that said that a judge could not head the SIU.

The Court had not seemed to be in a hurry to complete its work on the challenge from the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers before the Heath unit became a hot political chestnut. Then their report was suddenly produced. Indeed they dealt with it so quickly

that I believe even Judge Heath was taken by surprise. Could the differing interpretations of its recommendations indicate a certain ambiguity caused by it having been rushed?

The deputy president, Jacob Zuma, has also written to you in extremely angry and bitter terms.

Yes, but I find it difficult to believe that Jacob Zuma really wrote this letter, especially as I am told he was away in Cameroon on the date of the letter. Some people have speculated on who the writer was, their suggestions have included Mojanku Gumbi and Joel Netshitenzhe.

How much evidence do you think there is of corruption in the arms deal and what is the government so frightened about?

Well, I can't give you a final verdict. That's precisely why we wanted a professional investigation by a team including the Heath unit. Of the material I have seen I would say much of it is highly speculative while other of it is more plausible. One theory is that immediately large public contracts such as the arms purchases are put out to tender there is the emergence of new black empowerment companies around each project. This goes on to suggest that government quietly manipulates the process to make sure these companies are awarded business. This would have to be very secretive as it would have a very negative bearing on the business sentiment in the country.

With the Heath unit out, the demotion of Andrew Feinstein and the declaration by ANC chief whip Tony Yengeni that in future Scopa will work on party lines, does the arms probe have any future?

Despite what Tony Yengeni says I'm hopeful that we will not operate on party lines and that, as before, the public accounts committee will see its duties as centred on the need to protect the rights of Parliament and of the taxpayers. It is their money that has been spent and if Parliament has no say in the control of

expenditure then what is it for? We are sent here by the voters for that very reason. As for the ANC replacements on the committee, I am perfectly happy to work with Geoff Doidge whom I have always found to be a good human being in the past.

There are three key moments to watch. The first is when the committee meets to discuss the issues of the interpretation of our previous resolution on the arms deal. The second is our meeting with the four ministers who have denounced Scopa's work, when ANC members may feel under pressure. And the third is how we respond to the deputy president's letter attacking Scopa. I am hopeful that despite all the difficulties before us that we will get through this matter. It is true that the behaviour of the executive has been far more comprehensively interfering than the press has fully understood. It has left some people with little confidence in the integrity of a future inquiry. Some will feel that the way in which public officials have bent before the storm and have made 180 degree turns in order to side against Heath means that they will also not show sufficient integrity in pursuing the investigation of the arms contract deal itself. Nonetheless I feel reasonably confident that we can guarantee that there will be a full and thorough inquiry into this matter.

My hope is that we will get through the period of rough water ahead, working cohesively and amicably as a committee in carrying out this vital task. By May or June I hope we will have dealt with all of these matters. Then we can resume our proper business of scrutinising public expenditure in many other areas.

What about the pressures you are under?

Well I am not an ANC MP and minister Buthelezi has behaved impeccably and just left me to do my job. I don't think I am the man to buckle, though I could be deposed as chairman at any time, of course. In that case I would be in the same position as Andrew Feinstein, and I doubt whether he will now stay on Scopa a great deal longer. Personally I feel that my future reputation is on the line here in the sense that, either we will stand up for the rights of

Parliament against the executive, or we will be seen to have given in and failed to protect Parliament. Some people have tried to depict this as a personal matter, that I am on some sort of mission of my own. That is not how I see it. The struggle Scopa is involved with has a historic significance. In the lives of new democracies the precedents set in these early years can last for decades or even centuries. For me that is the crux.

You sound like a perfect parliamentary liberal. Could you ever find a place in the Democratic Alliance?

No. They are good people who often have excellent ideas but I don't think they understand African attitudes properly. We are in Africa and we have to adapt to African ways. I just don't think they have empathy. Sometimes I think that the fact that I grew up so poor and had to face such difficulties has given me a better understanding of the obstacles Africans have had to overcome. I know how one can feel about suffering disadvantages that are both crippling and irreversible but at the same time not one's fault. I am a liberal - but I'm happy in the IFP.