

BOOK REVIEW

Theresa Papenfus, *Pik Botha and his times*. Pretoria: Litera Publications, 2010. ISBN: 978-1-920188-34-4. 1029 pages.

Pik Botha is certainly a memorable man: a veteran (and now retired) politician, who, for more than three decades, was the political colossus of apartheid, South Africa's foreign policy. Pik Botha is, of course, a former South African Foreign Minister and colourful National Party politician: a man that "appeared to have been born with the portfolio of Foreign Affairs in his hands", in the words of the former Belgium Prime Minister, Leo Tindemans. For many journalists he was a newsmaker and the minister of drama, while some also associated him with passion, fun, smoking, drinking, and flirting.

Against this background, the book, *Pik Botha and his times*, authored by the journalist, Theresa Papenfus, takes a thoughtful look at the life of Mr Roelof "Pik" Botha as one of the most enduring of South African politicians. The book is not an autobiography, but was written with Botha's cooperation, although, according to the author, personal information was sometimes reluctantly imparted whenever he was approached. Still, the book includes many of his personal verses (expressing his deepest sentiments, often during days of heated cut and thrust politics), photographs and other personal information.

The book takes the reader from Pik Botha's early childhood to his career in the Department of Foreign Affairs, after having completed his LLB degree at the University of Pretoria. It touches on his involvement with the legal team that successfully defended South Africa's case on the South West Africa issue in The Hague in 1965. It also touches on his meteoric rise in the Department of Foreign Affairs where he became the Undersecretary (currently Deputy Director-General) at the age of 36, as well as his entrance into party politics and his controversial maiden speech in Parliament in which he argued that South Africa should identify herself more closely with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also takes the reader to his appointment as South African Ambassador at the UN amidst attacks on South Africa at the UN Headquarters in New York during the 1970s, as well as his (later) simultaneous responsibility and challenge to serve as South Africa's Ambassador to the United States in Washington.

The highlight of Pik Botha's career was certainly his appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1977, becoming, at 44, the youngest member of Cabinet. In this capacity he had to defend South Africa's apartheid policy internationally and deal with regional affairs in the context of Soviet involvement and (Macmillan's) winds of change blowing across the Southern African continent. Several chapters deal with and shed light on his responsibilities, tireless work and important views on matters ranging from the Nkomati Accord, the Rhodesian issue and Cuban

deployment in Angola. The following chapters are especially of interest: “The peacemaker of Komatipoort”; “Pik and the Rhodesians”; “South West”; “The resolution (435), the Cubans and the bottom line”; “South West became Namibia”. From these chapters it is clear that Botha worked in a milieu of regional turmoil and historical change – always as a chief player. He also interacted closely with some of the world’s most powerful and influential figures.

At the same time, Pik Botha was a prominent public figure in domestic politics. Theresa Papenfus succeeds in depicting Botha during South Africa’s apartheid days against the social background on the home front as well as the broader international political background of his time. In the opinion of many white South Africans, specifically members of the National Party, he had the qualities to become South Africa’s head-of-state. However, leading figures in his party felt that he did not have the personal qualities and emotional stability to lead the country. As a member of the National Party he was always working towards political change – sometimes one step ahead of his colleagues and politically increasingly concerned about the justifiability of apartheid. He was furthermore a pain in the neck for conservative whites who resisted political and social change in South Africa, as clearly depicted in chapters such as: “Onward to democracy – kicking and screaming”; “At the Rubicon”; “A black president”.

Pik Botha was undoubtedly instrumental to and at the centre of attempts to inspire fundamental change in the minds of white South Africans regarding the future political landscape, although some radical critics would probably argue that his role in the demise of apartheid was merely reactionary. At the same time, although intimately involved in the process of negotiations on a new South African constitution in the early-1990s, Pik Botha never played “an intense, decisive role” (p.671) in the technical constitution-making processes and his role was overshadowed by younger colleagues such as Roelf Meyer, Leon Wessels and even former President FW de Klerk. The book makes interesting reading on some of the reasons why this was the case.

Pik Botha did not retire from politics in 1994 but continued to serve in the post-1994 Mandela Cabinet during the time of the Government of National Unity as Minister of Mineral and Energy Affairs. His contributions and personal feelings during the period of fundamental political change and the transition of government in April 1994, especially having had to forfeit the portfolio of Foreign Affairs after so many years, as well as his views on the inevitability of change and serving under a new regime, also make interesting and insightful reading.

The book also covers Pik Botha in a personal context. Opinions on Botha differ from “a big mouth without substance” (p.5), “a maverick” (p.6), and “an introvert” (p.866). Henry Kissinger considered him to be “a man of substance” (p.4), while Chester Crocker stated that “his personality always struck us as somewhat

larger than life” (p.2). Furthermore, Botha’s reflections and opinions on matters of a religious nature, the universe, the survival of humankind and South Africa in the post-1994 era are also recorded in the book. His letters to and communication with former President Thabo Mbeki on issues of a political nature are of considerable interest. Likewise, his personal contact and interaction with the most brilliant scientist, Prof. Stephen Hawking, on issues of an intellectual and scientific nature also reveal much about the man, Pik Botha.

Where does this leave the readership in terms of the book’s merit and contribution? Theresa Papenfus’ research include a formidable range of sources. In addition to the conventional sources required for a study of this kind, it is also based on personal interviews and correspondence with Pik Botha himself as well as a range of significant and prominent South African and international figures. The contributions of academics, Pik Botha’s former colleagues, former members of his staff, his family, friends, acquaintances, journalists and erstwhile opponents are equally important and of considerable value. The book, which is well-written and carefully edited, is without question a *tour de force* about the life, work and legacy of Pik Botha, and in the final instance an authoritative source of information that took more than seven years to complete.

Some critics might argue that Theresa Papenfus’ work is lacking in terms of what is truly needed for a critical analysis on Pik Botha’s views and career. For instance, some scholars and academics might argue that Pik Botha was deeply involved in the destabilisation of Southern Africa in the 1970s and 1980s through South African political-military involvement in Angola, and that Papenfus is too uncritical towards Botha’s role in this regard. (See for instance Ignacio Ramonet’s book, *My life: Fidel Castro*, London: Allan Lane/Penguin Books on South African involvement in Namibia and Angola.) Yet, Papenfus succeeds in her attempt to write authoritatively and comprehensively on Pik Botha and his times. She highlights and reveals more than one side to the man Pik Botha, but does so in a sensitive manner without any obfuscation or sentimentality. The book is highly recommended for those with a passion for or interest in contemporary South African politics and history.

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