

MICHAEL COBDEN TALKS TO PROFESSOR MATTHEWS

Bechuanaland becomes the independent state of Botswana on September 30. Prime Minister Seretse Khama has picked a South African, Professor Z. K. Matthews, to represent Botswana at

the United Nations. Professor Matthews, former chairman of the African National Congress and, for the last five years, the secretary for Africa of the World Council of Churches, recently

passed through Johannesburg on his way to Gaberones for briefing before going to New York. Here he outlines his views on the international roles of his old and new countries.

OUR TASKS IN THIS AFRICA

Why have you taken this job as Botswana's representative at the United Nations?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: Because I'm deeply interested in Botswana's development. My forefathers came from Bechuanaland, you know. My father was born there and my grandfather is buried there, and although I was born in South Africa, in Barkly West, I am a Mongwato, like Seretse Khama. I was closely associated with his uncle and Seretse himself was a student of mine at Fort Hare. I won't be a stranger to Bechuanaland; it is a country I love very dearly.

And then, generally, in these five years I have been working for the World Council of Churches as the secretary for Africa I have become more and more interested in nation-building in Africa. I have travelled widely on this continent of ours. I've seen nations growing, and it's very exciting. This job will give me a chance to make a contribution to the start of a new nation.

But South Africa was your home and now you are going to another country to make your contribution. Isn't it a pity you can't make your contribution here?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: "I've tried in South Africa. I spent 35 years of my life in education in this country. And it wasn't in vain; however bleak things may seem right now. In Central and East Africa I can see some of the results of my work: many of the leaders of the new nations there passed through Fort Hare.

Certainly it would have been great if we could have developed a country here where any citizen could have been its representative. And although it hasn't happened that way, I believe it will eventually. I haven't ceased to believe that the African will ultimately find a proper place in South Africa. I hope I am not alone in that belief.

Some people may suggest that you have taken this Botswana job in the hope of influencing events in South Africa.

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: Whatever one does in one's country these days, whether you like it or not, may have some influence on other countries. I'm interested in the whole of Africa, and whether the Republic likes it or not it is part of Africa—it's not going to get off this continent. But you must remember that I am going to the United Nations as Botswana's representative. I'm not going there to express my views, but the views of my Government.

Could you say, then, before you are briefed, what role you envisage Botswana playing in Southern Africa and in Africa as a whole?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: I would imagine that Botswana will be friendly towards South Africa, though obviously I cannot say how we will vote on various issues in the United Nations. Botswana has a strategic position of great importance, surrounded as it is by South Africa, Rhodesia, Zambia, South West Africa and Angola. In a way this means it is hemmed in. But, looking



PROFESSOR Z. K. MATTHEWS

at it more positively, it gives us the opportunity to establish links with, and perhaps even between, these countries.

How significant a role we play depends on two factors: in international relations one can do only what one is permitted to do; and, secondly, there is so much to be done in Botswana before we can turn our attention to any ambitious international role.

Would you like to see your Prime Minister following Chief Leabua Jonathan's example in meeting the South African Prime Minister in Pretoria?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: Talks between representatives of different countries are fine, as long as they meet on an equal level. There's no point otherwise.

Will your country have official relations with Rhodesia under its present regime?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: I don't know, though I shouldn't imagine so.

What is your personal attitude to the Rhodesian question?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: I share the views of most people in Africa. I am disappointed at the way the situation has been handled.

You have always been a great believer in peaceful methods of change and of government. Has Rhodesia

disillusioned you? Would you like to see British troops in Rhodesia?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: The belief of Africans in peaceful methods should not be exploited, you know, to the extent of constantly telling us that we believe in peace so we mustn't complain if it doesn't work. The Rhodesian Government hasn't been very gentle in its treatment of Africans.

But the question shouldn't be put to me. In the first place I'm not qualified to say what the consequences would be of flying troops into Rhodesia. And secondly—and this is more important, because it is basic—it is not for me to prescribe the methods that must be adopted by Britain to handle the situation there.

What I can say is that the present methods do not seem to be producing the intended results, so other methods must be tried.

If your country is going to be friendly with South Africa this is obviously going to involve you in some very delicate diplomacy at the United Nations. How do you propose to justify to other African states this friendship with South Africa?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: Let me say first that one's international relations should be governed by one's own interests rather than by a predetermined position. If we decide it's in our interest to be friendly with South Africa, we will be. Botswana is a poor country and we may very possibly find that we've got so

much on our hands building up our own country that we can't take sides in international issues.

My own view is that Southern Africa must follow the example of the rest of the continent by sharing its people and its experience. This prepares the way for unity in Africa. I've always felt that South Africa should play a more positive role in Africa. Obviously the most developed state in Africa ought to be able, and ought to be willing, to make a great contribution to the development of the whole continent, or at least to put itself in the position to make a contribution.

Do you see any chance of relations between South Africa and other African states improving?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: Remember I'm speaking now as an African, not as a diplomat. There is a great deal of ignorance about South Africa; about what is going on in the rest of Africa. All South Africans know about is the troubles, the coups. They know nothing about the development. South Africans always complain that other people are ignorant about South Africa; but how much do South Africans know about other countries? And South Africa must take the lead, however difficult it is. If they claim to be the torch-bearers of civilisation, then they must carry the torch.

I would like to see South Africans, particularly politicians, visiting African states—and I believe that if approaches are made from the top in a spirit of goodwill this can be arranged, as long as South Africans go as ordinary human beings. South Africa has to take the lead. And the first thing she should do is to stop assuming that all other countries are enemies.

Will you be able to make a contribution towards improving relations between South Africa and other countries?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: I can't be expected to whitewash South Africa, and South Africa isn't doing much to improve its own image. Whenever I am questioned about South Africa I can't do anything but answer honestly.

However, I am interested in the whole of Africa and I believe very strongly that South Africa shouldn't be looked at in isolation. So that I shall support, as long as that is what my Government wants, any move on South Africa's part to integrate herself more in the continent of Africa.

You have been a great leader of Africans here: do you have any final message to them before you become a citizen of another country?

PROFESSOR MATTHEWS: Africans are always being offered advice, and I think they must get very tired of it. With all that's happened in the last five years in South Africa it must be hard for them to feel optimistic about their own future, but I can't believe that such a loving, lovable people as they are can be denied a better place in their own country indefinitely.

They'll get it as long as they never give up their desire for it and their belief that they deserve it.