

PEOPLE

A PLACE IN THE SUN

The FM Interview — William Mervin Gumede gets controversial with Financial & Fiscal Commission chairman Murphy Morobe

Murphy Morobe (46), chairman of the Financial & Fiscal Commission (FFC), reveals early on in our interview that he has declined the plum nomination of executive mayor of Greater Johannesburg. This is so that he can complete his term at the FFC, which ends in 2003.

Morobe has also been juggling three other positions. Last year, he was appointed chairman of the accounting and business advisory firm Ernst & Young, sparking controversy about whether this might conflict with constitutional requirements.

The year before, he became chairman of the SA National Parks Board. And he was also a member of Education Minister Kader Asmal's working group, which assessed SA universities and technikons and investigated merging some.

Has the FFC been so marginalised that Morobe has lost interest in it? No, he insists, making the point about forgoing the mayorship to underscore his commitment.

Morobe, a former United Democratic Front activist, took up the tough job of chairman in 1994. Several other nominees had turned down what seemed an unglamorous, thankless and, considering the stress involved, low-paid task.

Diplomatic skills and political clout were necessary for the chairman to navigate his way through bitter battles between central government, provinces and local government over the allocation of revenue. And to prepare himself Morobe spent a year at

Princeton University in the US, studying public policy.

Apart from keeping an eye on equity in the division of the revenue cake, the FFC's constitutional task is to act as counterweight to the Finance Ministry.

But critics argue that it has been found wanting in this respect. One example often cited is its inability to influence the priorities of the Budget and to make the Budget process more accountable. In its annual report last year, the FFC complained that government had ignored its recommendations.

Few suggestions get Morobe as worked up as that the commission be downgraded or even scrapped. Finance Minister Trevor Manuel suggested last year that the FFC had outlived its usefulness now that central government and the provinces had learnt to co-operate over budget allocations.

"Talk of the marginalisation [of the FFC] is misplaced," insists Morobe.

After Manuel's Budget speech last week, the role of the FFC is again under the spotlight as civil society groups and, increasingly, parliament complain about having no input on how the Budget is drawn up. Morobe says he is sympathetic to critics who say the Budget process should be more participatory.

"But the FFC can only recommend and advise," he says. "It has no veto. If we can't persuade people, it does not mean we are just rubberstamping

[Finance Ministry] decisions."

Morobe says the Constitution provides people and organisations with the means to lobby for changes in the way Budget priorities are decided upon. But people don't always know how to "leverage the system" for change.

But the FFC and parliament — especially the parliamentary portfolio committee on finance — are looking at ways to make the Budget process more inclusive.

Morobe passionately defends the FFC's record as watchdog, though, and says it warned the Finance Ministry on several occasions that fiscal policy was in danger of being overly tight-fisted. "This is to the point where it becomes unbearable to the poor."

The FFC has consistently warned about government under-spending, especially in social services. And it is looking at a proposal on an early warning system that could alert central government to where under-spending is likely to occur.

Morobe says the FFC has also warned against decreasing spending on infrastructure. It has suggested the government introduce a capital grant scheme for provinces to improve and maintain capital expenditure. And it has warned central government about the negative long-term fiscal impact that the multimillion-rand arms acquisition programme would have.

The lobbying of the FFC is partly responsible for Manuel's increase in the allocation of funds to local government in the Budget.

Morobe foresees a future FFC that is leaner and plays an even bigger role in local government finances. It will also offer more research and advice on policy and budgeting to provincial and local authorities, as well as to the parliamentary finance committee.

He is confident about the future of the FFC, even though in its 1998/1999 report it complained of having to "fight for its place in sun". He sees it as integral to constitutional checks and balances.

Morobe was born in Orlando East, Soweto, and is a cricket fan. He was a reasonable wicket-keeper and middle-order batsman, and represented his school — that hotbed of political dissent, Morris Isaacson High — at the John Passmore week, the black equivalent of Nuffield week.

It was widely expected that Morobe would join his close former UDF associates — Mohammed Valli Moosa, Mosiuoa Lekota and Popo Molefe — by taking a senior post in SA's first democratic government. But he declined, though he was on the ANC's election list, because he could not conceive of being a full-time politician.

No-one would be surprised if he were having second thoughts. ■