

A MAN IN FULL

AS A LABOUR ACTIVIST, US AMBASSADOR TO SA PATRICK GASPARD IS HONEST ABOUT THE DANGERS OF STRIKE ACTION

TEXT NICHOLAS KOTCH PHOTOGRAPHY SANDY COFFEY



If you find yourself seated next to Patrick Gaspard at dinner, relax. There is zero chance of a nervous lull in the conversation with President Barack Obama's personal choice as US ambassador to SA.

Without even beginning to drain the reservoir of topics about which the 46-year-old is qualified and seemingly enthusiastic to talk, you could cover Haiti, the land of his parents, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where he was born, the A-Z of New York City, where he was raised, or the American civil rights and labour movements, where he cut his teeth. Obama's a good theme as well, since he was political director in the Obama White House for five years.

Now we can safely add SA and other parts of Africa to the areas of his expertise. Gaspard was far from an ignoramus on those subjects when he arrived in Pretoria — he presented his ambassadorial credentials to President Jacob Zuma last October — as he demonstrated at his Senate nomination hearing and at a succession of private briefings with movers and shakers here.

Gaspard, who first visited SA in 1992 and, unsurprisingly, met Nelson Mandela during his stay, is clearly someone whoaced his homework at school and learnt to seize opportunity with both hands.

He had to dash back to New York during the Christmas break for the inauguration of his best friend Bill De Blasio, the city's new mayor. Indeed, the time and effort he will have to spend in order to remain in the inside track of American politics while simultaneously playing the prominent role in SA which the State Department will expect of him is going to require a prodigious sense of balance.

Gaspard speaks often and with emotion about the lasting influence of his late father, a Haitian teacher who left his Caribbean homeland, the world's first independent black republic, because of his increasingly dangerous opposition to president-for-life and dictator François "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

Gaspard Senior heard the call by Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, for educated and French-speaking blacks to help build the country from the damaged shell in which Belgian colonisers had left it in 1960.

Gaspard was born in what is today Kinshasa, in a kind of second-generation exile, while his father taught Latin and Mathematics; even 50 years ago, Latin was considered a rather specialised building block for a new African nation.

Lumumba was assassinated, Congo became a theatre for the Cold War, and as Mobutu Sese Seko began his 30-year rule, the Gaspards had to move on again in the late 1960s, this time to New York, when Gaspard was two years old.

"I used to believe that I had memories of Congo of my own but now I'm sure they were from my parents' stories

and from photographs," he says. "In the States my father remained very, very connected to, and dedicated to, the Congo, to the culture, the politics and the history," the ambassador said in an interview with *Business Day* in Port Elizabeth.

"The strongest thing that my father communicated to me, over and over again, was that Africa was not some remote, dark place over there. As children growing up in America he wanted us to appreciate that there was a real connectedness between what happened here on the continent and what took place in the US."

A trim and neatly dressed figure, some of the Obama style has either rubbed off on Gaspard or he was a fluent and humorous public speaker before they met. He says "no one smiles like a Haitian" and provides the proof.

He praises SA for what he calls its "forward-leaning" role in the DRC, and in Africa generally, particularly on the security and economic fronts.

He describes SA's leadership in the continent and in the African Union as "exemplary" and driven by a desire to repay the generosity shown by other Africans to exiles during apartheid.

"There are certainly instances where the US government and the South African government differ on approach but at the end of the day we share the same aims, we share similar values, so there is a tremendous amount of synergy."

Something else that most South Africans share with most Americans is a passion for automobiles. That was largely what brought Gaspard to PE, the local Detroit, where he toured the plants of both Ford and General Motors, the second of which was opened as far back as 1926.

As a Democrat and a prominent labour activist in the US, he paid close attention to the long strikes and shutdowns that hit South African industry in the latter part of last year. They worried him because of the estimated price tag of \$2bn in lost revenue.

"In my very short and limited experience here I have to say I have some anxiety about the ease with which the strike tool — which in the States we see as the nuclear option — is employed.

"As labour leaders, if industry folds its tent and moves elsewhere then you have absolutely no ability to provide for your workers and no contracts to bargain because the jobs just won't be there any more."

But overall, the new envoy is positive (not super positive) about what he's found.

"A vibrant, engaged press corps, a civil society that can agitate when necessary and a business community like our American Chamber of Commerce that understands that it can't just operate in its own silo. So I'm very encouraged."

INTERVIEW

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