

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Founder's Day Award for Distinguished Leadership from Lincoln University (1998)
- Presidential Citation for Outstanding Achievements from the University of Delaware (1996)
- Alpha Chi Honour Society Award for Academic Excellence from Lincoln University (1986)

DEFINING MOMENT

Being part of the Bilaterals and the Multi-Party Negotiating Process that ultimately saw the establishment of a democratic public service (civil service) for South Africa. "When you pursue your education, you don't know where it will lead you. For me, that education gave me the opportunity to implement and bring to bear what I had learnt to help create the South African Public Service Commission, with its critical public administration oversight role."

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

"I do our home decorating, including choosing the curtains and all the artwork in my home, and my wife knows she just has to appreciate it. I have a real interest in antiques and buy and restore them. I'm also known for regularly rearranging things at home; everything must always be very neat. People often ask about our 'professional interior decorator' but I just laugh because it's all me."

BREAKFAST WITH NELSON MANDELA BROUGHT VIL-NKOMO BACK TO SOUTH AFRICA

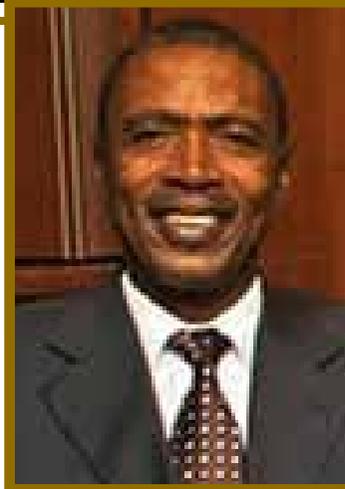
When Sibusiso Vil-Nkomo left South Africa he intended to join the military wing of the African National Congress in Botswana at the height of the Soweto uprising; a future in academia and the public service couldn't have seemed more unlikely. But when Ida Wood – a civil rights activist of the Phelps-Stokes Fund – told him at the end of December 1977 to stay out of trouble for the next few months because by January the following year he would be in New York to begin his studies, everything changed.

Fast-forward to 2018 and this leading academic and public sector policy expert is a multi-award-winning international scholar and a doyen of public service administration. Currently a research professor at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship at the University of Pretoria (UP), Vil-Nkomo is among several luminaries appointed by President Cyril Ramaphosa to sit on a panel to review the functioning of the country's State Security Agency.

On arrival in the United States, Vil-Nkomo found he would be pursuing his studies at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and he completed his BA Economics (Public Affairs) *magna cum laude* in 1980. The university is also the *alma mater* of Ghana's first prime minister and President Kwame Nkrumah, and Nnamdi Azikiwe, who became the first democratic President of Nigeria after the end of colonial rule. Vil-Nkomo completed his Masters and PhD degrees at the University of Delaware, and went back to establish the Centre for Public Policy and Diplomacy at Lincoln University. He currently serves on the School of Public Policy and Administration advisory board at the University of Delaware. He has benefited from his exposure during this time to leading professors like institutional economist, Ann Seidman, sociologist Emmanuel Wallerstein, public policy specialist Dan Rich, anti-apartheid activist and poet Denis Brutus, among others.

"The Centre for Public Policy and Diplomacy, funded by the Commonwealth State of Pennsylvania, became very successful. What I didn't know at the time was that all this experience was giving me an excellent grounding in preparation for my return to South Africa to become involved in public service and policy issues," he says.

He has taught at and been associated with several other universities and organisations in the United States, has been a presenter at the Brookings Institution Library and worked at the Library of Congress, the World Bank Library and the International Monetary Fund Library during his tenure as a Fulbright Research Scholar. In his further academic endeavours, he met and befriended Professor Kassahun Checole, a leading owner of Africa World Press and Red Sea Press, based in Trenton, New Jersey.



Vil-Nkomo has published in academic and scientific journals and books, locally and internationally. He has conducted applied research on the public service, organisational development, related technology, ethics, and efficient and effective delivery services. He has also presented papers at local and international scientific conferences and research institutions. In 2015 Vil-Nkomo received the South African Association of Public Administration and Management's highest honour, a Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of the role his research played in shaping the evolution of the discipline, both as a science and a praxis. He believes in a transdisciplinary approach to teaching and studying public governance that goes beyond the dry definitions of management and leadership. Economics, he says, is important for public servants and policymakers to understand.



LONG JOURNEY TO EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SERVICE

"To develop a vibrant and effective public service is a long journey. It takes several generations to reach a point of satisfaction, while at the same time accepting that public services continue to evolve. So, the generation-to-generation development of proper values and ethics in any public service remains the cornerstone of success," he says.

Vil-Nkomo finally knew he'd been right to tailor his studies in his chosen direction after a pivotal 6 am breakfast with former President Nelson Mandela in 1991 prompted the decision that he and his wife, Renosi Mokate, made to return to South Africa to help build the new democracy. The day had finally come for him to return and apply his knowledge appropriately.

"It was a completely new beginning for me," he says. Vil-Nkomo's contribution to the transformation of the public service in South Africa is indelibly imprinted on the country's post-apartheid history. He was integral in finalising the details of the civil service provisions in the interim constitution of the new government in 1993, and created and administered South Africa's new, integrated civil service. In 1994, President Mandela named him Public Service Commissioner. He went on to become the first black Dean in the history of UP, and also the first black Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences.

In his bid to further improve access to education in the field about which he is so passionate, in 2010 Vil-Nkomo also co-founded the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), the board of which he still chairs today. "MISTRA came out of a commitment to the importance of creating a knowledge reservoir that can deal with issues from a transdisciplinary perspective." He was concerned at the gap in the South African landscape, where think tanks were not addressing the reality of the changes that had taken place since 1994. "It was business as usual, unfortunately," he says.

There was further concern about continuity for all the policy initiatives that had emerged in 1994, and how these could be developed into something that could advance the country in a scenario where universities were not necessarily shaping up as 'knowledge reservoirs'. The kind of research he wants to see produced by South African institutions generally, he says, should be based on theory, but should also be usable: "Most importantly, it must lead to implementation."

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

ASSAf Research Repository

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A. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Publications

C. ASSAf Policymakers' Booklets

2020

Legends of South African Science II

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), (2019). Legends of South African Science II.

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