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Zondo commission - Zuma wanted Eskom inquiry, Myeni's 'fixer' tells Zondo

Not only did former president Jacob Zuma want an inquiry into the affairs of a poorly performing Eskom in early 2015, but he was also present at the meeting at which the suspensions of three executives of the power utility were first mooted. At the suggestion of his confidante and then SAA chairperson Dudu Myeni, the services of private consultant Nick Linnell were enlisted to help make it happen.

Linnell testified via video link before the commission of inquiry into state capture on Monday, detailing the events of a meeting with Zuma, Myeni, her son Thalente, then Eskom chairperson Zola Tsotsi, and Jabu Masangwany, whom Linnell thought at the time to be in the secret service. It happened on Sunday 8 March 2015, at Zuma's official home in Durban.

Linnell had first encountered Myeni during her tenure as chairperson of the Mhlathuze Water Board, where he had been referred by a colleague, he said, to help sort out governance issues that had arisen. Myeni roped him in later when she had moved to SAA, where he was asked to coordinate the process of an inquiry.

Evidence leader Pule Seleka asked for Linnell's comment on his perceived role as Myeni's "Mr Fixer", to which Linnell took slight offence, particularly to the connotation hinted at by private investigator Paul O'Sullivan before the 2017 parliamentary enquiry into Eskom.

"I think that's an unreasonable association or narrative to put to it. In the context that I was engaged in a number of instances where things would get fixed in the proper sense, then that might be fairly attributed. But the narrative itself is probably unreasonable," he defended.

Like Tsotsi, Linnell's account of the meeting was that Myeni led the discussions, outlining the problems that Eskom was facing at the time. His impression of the discussion, he told the commission, was not for purposes of convincing Zuma of the need for an inquiry, but more to outline to him how it was going to unfold.

"It wasn't so much a gathering to work out a proposal to propose the president. The expectation was to make sure that the proposal we gave the president fits his expectation," said Linnell, adding that the discussion around this would happen directly with Zuma and in real time.

"He wasn't involved in a discussion as much as 'this is what is proposed', and he asked a number of questions as I recall."

Linnell was also aware that there was a political undertone to the suggested strategy, and the presence of Myeni in such a discussion solidified his thinking.

“To my mind, Ms Myeni is said to be a close confidante and political ally of the president, and she is also the SAA chairperson for this reason. So her role there was not as the chairperson of SAA, but because she is a confidante and political ally of the president,” said Linnell.

“I was very conscious of the fact that she is politically connected. I was conscious that we were dealing with an entity, but there were political personalities involved.”

The only person visibly opposed to the suspension of three executives identified in the plan was Tsotsi, but in the end Zuma directed him to ensure that he swiftly get the rest of the board up to speed on the plan. Zuma would contact the minister of public enterprises, Lynne Brown.

Eskom’s top three executives, including CEO Tshediso Matona, were to be suspended in the days following the meeting.

Linnell is expected to continue his testimony on Tuesday.

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