

I. B. TABATA

Letter to Mandela

on

**THE PROBLEM OF ORGANISATIONAL
UNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

June 1948

Plus: Letter To AP Mda March 1948

FOREWORD

IB Tabata was born in Bailey in the Eastern Cape in 1909. He moved to Cape Town in 1934 and shortly afterwards, he became a member of the Workers Party of South Africa. Committed to scientific socialism, he went on to play a major role in the South African liberatory struggle. He was in the forefront of the establishment of the Unity Movement of South Africa (originally the Non-European Unity Movement) and later, the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa. During his life time he became widely respected, by friend and foe alike, as a foremost theoretician in the liberatory movement. He was both a powerful orator and a penetrating writer. His best known published works include "The Awakening of a People", "The Boycott as Weapon of Struggle", "Education For Barbarism", "The Imperialist Conspiracy in Africa" and "Apartheid Cosmetics Exposed". He died in exile in Harare in 1990 while holding the office of presidency of both the UMSA and the APDUSA.

Tabata's letter to Nelson Mandela, written in 1948, was first published in Zambia in 1965 under the auspices of the leadership of the Unity Movement of South Africa in exile. Aimed mainly at those in Africa who were sympathetic to the South African liberatory struggle, its purpose was to explain how the programme and ideology of the UMSA differed from other South African political organisations. Since then this letter has acquired a new relevance.

At present, the ANC-led Government of National Unity, under the presidency of Mandela, faces widespread and growing criticism for its failure to effect any meaningful change in the conditions of existence of the South African masses. Most of these criticisms rest on the underlying assumption that such a change is possible within the realms of the new political order that was born in 1994. Yet every new development brings into question not merely the willingness of the ANC and the entire new political regime to realise this goal, but whether it is possible simply by a suitable revision of governmental strategies.

The relevance of Tabata's letter lies in its illustration of the importance of a principled political programme that is based on a fundamental understanding of the contending forces in society. It demonstrates clearly that the reasons for the failures of the ANC are not simply to be found in the present but in the political path that it chose many years ago. It teaches us that there is no clear path to real social liberation without a proper understanding of our history. Mandela, upon whose image the ANC relies so heavily, must share with its leadership the responsibility of having led the masses into a blind alley.

This edition gives an exact transcript of the letter as originally published in 1965 and includes the text of the related letter from IB Tabata to AP Mda, written shortly after the letter to Mandela.

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

In view of the many questions that have been asked of us by both individuals and representatives of organisations and bodies as to the differences between ourselves and other political organisations that exist in South Africa, in particular, the African National Congress, we have decided to publish a letter that was written by Mr. I.B. Tabata, President of the Unity Movement of South Africa to Mr. Nelson Mandela in 1948, the same year that the Broederbond took over power in South Africa. Mr. Mandela is now serving life-imprisonment in Robben Island. The passage which refers to more personal matters has been omitted.

We hope that this letter will throw some light on the differences in approach to the problem of organisation between the leadership of those organisations that are united under the Unity Movement and the leaderships of those that are outside this Unity.

For those who have time to make an independent and thorough investigation we can do no better than refer them to the wealth of material published by the Unity Movement and the All-African Convention and addresses to the population of South Africa during those crucial years between 1943 and 1960 when our organisations were struggling to unite the oppressed people of South Africa and wean them from the political udders of the liberals and their, fellow-travellers, and place them on an independent path of struggle free from the influences of herrenvolkism at home and imperialism in general.

From this letter it will also be apparent that we do make a distinction between a leadership that consciously and designedly collaborates with the enemies of freedom on the one hand, and honest but misguided young men who, owing to a conspiracy of circumstances, very often find themselves enmeshed in the machinations of political villains who serve as agents of imperialism on the other.

This letter was written in the best spirit of brotherliness by a man who believed in the essential political integrity of this mentally restless young intellectual who was honestly groping for political clarity in the confusion of the baffling political perspectives in our country. It was designed by one who knew Nelson Mandela closely to help him solve his basic dilemma: to make the final choice between the subterfuges of opportunism and the real struggle for liberation. Unfortunately the tides of history overtook Mandela, engulfed him and carried him out to sea.

Lusaka Zambia.

March 1965.

LETTER TO MANDELA

On the Problem of Organisational Unity in South Africa

80 Harrington Street

Cape Town

16th June, 1948.

My dear Mandela,

... Now to the discussion on the question of organisation, which is every day assuming greater importance. Let me state from the outset that I do not support the idea of organising the people for the sake of organisation. People can be organised for good or evil. This on the face of it may seem a childish platitude. But my experience has taught me - as you too, must have perceived if you have pondered over it - that it is absolutely necessary for every individual to ask himself the question: what purpose does this or that organisation serve? It is not what the members say or think about an organisation that matters. It is not even a question of the good intentions of the leaders. What is of paramount importance is the programme and principles of the organisations. To put it another way: it is not the subjective good-will of the leaders that matters, but the objective function of the organisation, what effect it has on society. In other words, the question to ask is: **whose interests does the organisation serve objectively?** This is the only correct approach to the discussion of the present organisations.

I ask you to use this test. Apply it to yourself and the organisation to which you belong. (African National Congress). If you use it honestly and rigidly, without prejudice or emotion, you are bound to arrive at the correct conclusion. You will remember that when you were here, I asked you the following question: Can you give me any good reason, political reason, why you joined the African National Congress? - apart from the fact that your father, or your father's father, belonged to it and it was supposed to be an organisation for African people - an argument that is purely sentimental and falling outside the realm of politics.

I have said above that the people can be organised, for good or evil. I can have no quarrel with any organisation which is built for the purpose of fighting for liberty. Such an organisation, if it is true to its principles, will seek to unite the oppressed people and will at the same time follow a course of non-collaboration with the Government. But I am totally opposed to any organisation whose policy is to collaborate with the Government, and disunite the people. And this is the crux of the question.

Let me state here that when I talk of the African National Congress, I exclude the Youth League. Politically, it does not belong to the Congress. It is one of those peculiar anomalies which arise in a political situation where there is lack of crystal clarity in political thinking. If the Youth League followed its political principles to their logical conclusion, it would land itself outside the fold of Congress, so that, though you regard yourselves as part of the Congress, I am more correct from a political standpoint in drawing the distinction. In fact, the African National Congress is rooted, in the past, whereas the Youth

League is the product of modern conditions with a modern outlook. That is the essential difference between them. It is not my purpose, however, to develop this point at this stage. I am more concerned with organisational difficulties. In other words. I am concerned with posing the problem of organisation in the proper way. My task is not a difficult one, because the recent political events which have taken place amongst the African people have served to open the eyes of many who have laboured under past illusions. All the same, I feel it is necessary to give you a resume of the past, for I am conscious of the fact that, because of your youth, you did not have the opportunity of living through the events leading up to the 1936-48 period. You have therefore been dependent on information from the older men who are all too prone to give you a distorted picture of the events and the issue involved. They do this, not because of any innate propensities for lying, but because of the necessity to justify their personal political position.

Let us therefore briefly recapitulate the past. The beginning of this century closed a chapter in our history - the end of the resistance of the Blacks by military means. It opened a new chapter with new forms of struggle, the political form of struggle. This manifested itself in the formation of Imbumba and Ingqungquthela. These were federations of tribes, natural enough in tribal communities. The year 1912 saw the creation of the first African organisation on an individualist basis, with the breaking up of tribalism. This was a progressive step, i.e. Congress was progressive as compared with the past. But though in form the African National Congress had broken with the past, it had not completely shed the tribalist outlook. It could not be otherwise; for an organisation is the product of its time. It ushered in a new outlook more in keeping with the times and therefore deserved the support of all progressives.

As a result of this outlook, many other organisations sprang up on an individualist basis of membership. There were the political, professional and trade union organisations and civic bodies, all of which had one purpose, to fight for freedom. The rise of the organisations showed a further progress in the development of the people. But the fight for freedom was undertaken by each organisation in isolation from the rest. The struggle was uncoordinated and this led to disaster, so that by the 1930's all the African organisations had disintegrated and become completely atomised. The characteristic feature of this stage of development was a mutual suspicion, rivalry and hatred between the various organisations. It became the duty of the leaders of one organisation to denounce all others, not because of the difference in political policies or principles, but because they could not brook any rivalry in the leadership, Each one felt that the other organisations were not necessary and that everybody should join the particular organisation where he was the leader. Thus all political fights degenerated into personal squabbles and the leaders exhausted all their energies in fratricidal strife. Then came 1935, which opened up a new chapter. It was the year of the notorious Hertzog Bills, the fraud of "Native Representation", the Native Trust and Land Bill and the Urban Areas Amendment Bill. By now it was evident that the organisations which had sprung up had come to stay. All of them were necessary in their various spheres. But what was needed was a body that would co-ordinate their struggles, create a unified leadership which could give direction to their multifarious activities.

The African people spontaneously created the ALL-AFRICAN CONVENTION. The political exigencies of the time and the crisis of the new Slave Bills forced the people to organise on a nation-wide scale. So without any premeditated theory the people spontaneously gave birth to a form of organisation which could

knit together a whole people into a single compact unit, a fighting force. The pre-dominant idea at the time was **unity**. And this was a higher political level. The pre-dominant thought in everybody's mind was how to remove competition and eliminate all rivalry between the organisations. Each leader was to bring his followers to this federal body, and together with leaders of other organisations they were to form a single leadership with a common aim and a common purpose. Mutual antagonisms and rivalry were replaced by a spirit of co-operation. The leader who jealously guarded his personal position was replaced by a unified leadership and petty sectional considerations gave way to a form of thought which embraced the whole race. This was the concept that resulted in the birth of the All-African Convention.

This was the turning point in the organisational history of the African people. It was expected that this would constitute a point of departure for all our activities and that any further political development would have as its basis the form adopted in 1935. I have said above that the African people spontaneously created this federal form of organisation. Not even the leaders themselves had stopped to examine it theoretically and evaluate its possibilities. They did not fully appreciate the potentialities and the full value of their discovery.

The ruling-class, however, was fully alive to the danger to itself inherent in this development, in this idea of unity. It could prove the basis for a new outlook. And they were aware of the interconnection between the form of an organisation and the political outlook. This cleared the road for a national outlook, which was the logical outcome of this stage of development. A national outlook of an oppressed people constitutes the first stage of a threat to white domination. Such an outlook had to be stopped at all costs by the ruling-class.

What I am trying to emphasise to you is this, that if the African people had progressed from 1935 as a **unit**, they would by now have reached a stage whereby their whole outlook, their propaganda and their agitation, their energies and their manual resources would have put them in a position to challenge the existing position of the herrenvolk.

It was to stop this that the herrenvolk did their best, to sow confusion amongst the African people. The idea of the All African Convention had to be smashed at birth. It was comparatively easy for the rulers to succeed, at least in part, for the idea had not yet become part and parcel of the people's thinking.

They found a willing stooge in the person of the late Dr. Dube, at that time Mr. Dube, a principal of some, secondary school in Natal. He was the first one to break away from the All-African Convention. With him went practically the whole of Natal. The white press acclaimed him as a great statesman, a moderate, a practical politician, and in fact the epitome of all virtues. They crowned him with a halo of greatness and conferred a doctorate on him. It was as Dr. Dube that he led the Zulus back to tribalism where they still stagnate to-day.

This was a brilliant move on the part of the oppressors. Seeing the reward and honours heaped on Dube, the Selope Themas and others of the same brand followed suit. But still these people could not smash the All-African Convention, by the mere fact of breaking away and asking others to follow suit. For this breaking of unity an organisation was necessary. Thus the African National Congress was resuscitated by those very

individuals. At that time they held out to the people that Congress was going to be used to gather the unorganised masses and bring them into the Convention (AAC). But once Congress had gathered to itself a fairly respectable number of people they wrenched the organisation away from the All-African Convention. By this time Dr. Xuma, an **ex-President of the Convention**, who had so eloquently declared himself for unity at the birth of that body, was head of Congress (ANC). The white press picked him and built him up as a great leader, a great champion of the cause of the African people. This they did with an end in view.

The young intellectuals who left school or college at the end of the thirties or the beginning of the forties, and who entered the political arena at this time, found Dr. Xuma as the proclaimed leader of the African people, and without asking any questions they threw in their lot with him. He shouted Unity from the house-tops and the press helped him to unite people under Congress. Why? Because to unite people under a splinter organisation (that had broken away from the federal body, the All-African Convention) was to foster organised disunity. And that was the surest way of causing political confusion amongst the African people. The oppressors had to foster and support, by every means in their power, an organisation which sets itself up in opposition to the AAC, in order to kill the very spirit of real unity on a higher plane of development. For it was this that had given rise to the All-African Convention.

What the rulers succeeded in doing - and this the younger intellectuals do not know - was to plunge the African people back to the pre-1935 stage, that whole epoch in which the struggles of the people had been reduced to a stalemate by fratricidal strife and the mutual rivalries between leaders. It is this that bedevils us to this day.

I know that you have often wondered why we are so intransigent, and yet we say we want unity. In fact I suspect that you think we are plainly bigoted and obstinate. The truth of the matter is that we are defending a position which was conquered by the African people in 1935. We want unity on that basis, i.e. real unity on the basis of the existing organisations in such a way that the interests of each are the interests of the whole, a unity which will serve as the basis for the further development leading to truly national movement uniting all sections of the Non-Europeans - so greatly feared by the rulers.

If you consider the ground already covered by the African people in their development, and if you visualise what might have been accomplished by this time, if this retrograde step had not been taken, then you become aware of the enormity of the crime committed by the Congress against a whole people.

Up to now I have not said anything about the divergence of political outlook between the Congress and the Convention, the yawning gap that separates the two organisations in the matter of principles. This is not because I think that political differences are of lesser importance; it is simply because I want to give you some idea of the past history of our political development. As it is, the letter has become too long, so I propose to postpone this aspect to a later date, if you wish to discuss it any further.

At the moment I can only add that those organisations which are affiliated to the Convention are facing in one direction while Congress is facing in the very opposite direction. The first group have rejected the superiority of the White race over Black: they have rejected trusteeship with all that it implies: segregation,

sectionalism and tribalism. The All-African Convention has openly stated its policy, which is in line with this outlook, and it is following a clearly defined course without any concessions, compromise or deviations.

The African National Congress, on the other hand, is doing the very opposite of these things. Many critics of Congress often say: "The trouble with Congress is that it has no policy." There could be nothing further from the truth than this statement, Congress has a definite policy. Only it is not openly stated, for it cannot bear examination. Those who are interested can only divine this policy by watching the activities of Congress over a long period. They will find that, at every critical moment, Congress has played into the hands of the Government, either by directly siding with the Government against the people (for example, in the case of the Boycott of elections of White representatives) or by sowing confusion in the ranks of the people to such an extent that all efforts at gathering them together for a concerted fight oppression are rendered ineffectual.

The history of the Congress in the last five years is too well known to require recapitulation. It is too painful even to contemplate. What I consider is the most despicable deed is the fact that some of the Congress leaders are not merely satisfied with sowing confusion within the African section. They now seek to extend their wrecking tactics to a broader plane and are bringing disruption amongst the ranks of the Non-Europeans who are striving to come together.

To mention only two examples: Dr. Xuma's pact with the two Indian doctors, Dadoo and Naicker - an example of "Unity" that is opposed to the principled unity of all Non-Europeans as formulated in the policy of the Non-European Unity Movement. And now there is the Votes For All Assembly. Anything and everything to create excitement for the moment. It does not avail the Mosakas and the Xumas to deny any connection with this new hoax the Votes For All Assembly. They must take the blame for it. The press has proved conclusively that Mosaka was one of the sponsors, by publishing the facsimile of the document with his signature. Xuma was cute enough not to sign anything, but he made a silly slip-up in connection with the funds. If you examine the financial statement published in the minutes of this Assembly, you will find that there is an item of expenditure amounting to £22.17.6 for Dr. Xuma's press conference. Let Dr. Xuma explain this away. But, apart altogether from these lesser connections, there is the bigger connection, a political tie-up between Xuma and the organisers of the Assembly.

There has been a flirtation going on between them for the past few years. Naturally they depended on his help to go through with this fraud.

To make myself clear, let me put it this way. If Xuma and "his" Congress had been in the Convention and therefore working in harmony with the Non-European Unity Movement, on the basis of a principled programme, i.e. the 10-Point Programme for full democratic rights for all, nobody would have dreamed of asking him to support such fraudulent schemes. In point of fact, the organisers of the "Votes For All" campaign would not have found it possible even to contemplate starting such a move. The Communist Party would not have had a foothold amongst the African people, who are to-day used as a cover for all the nefarious deeds of all the careerists and opportunists.

I have brought up these various points for your serious consideration. You have to take up your stand in this light. Finally, let me mention one aspect of position which I feel sure you have not considered. You and all your fellow members of the Congress Youth League are talking with two voices at one and the same time. As members of the Youth League you speak the language of the modern intellectual, progressive, independent and rejecting inferiority. But as members of the African National Congress your language is the negation of all these things. You accept the theory of inferiority and trusteeship, with all its political manifestations. For example: segregated institutions like the Native Representative Council, (where leaders of the Congress serve), voting for three Whites to "represent" Africans in the Whites-only Parliament; and sitting on Advisory Boards, the Bunga, etc.

I can hear you protesting that never at any time did you and the Congress Youth League accept these things. Yes, you may not have done so in words, but you have done so in fact and in deed. The Youth League is part and parcel of the organic body of Congress, which does all these things. That fact alone speaks more emphatically than words themselves. It is no use you protesting that the Youth League was originally organised by Congress. Granted that it makes its public statements on events, proclaims its policy and passes its own resolutions on the fundamental questions of the day, all of which are diametrically opposed to the policy and actions of Congress. Nevertheless it remains an entity within Congress, and voluntarily. This puts you in the position of political januses with two heads facing in two different directions at one and the same time. This in politics is known as opportunism, and opportunism is the worst disease that can infect any political organisation. In fact it is the canker that has claimed the greatest toll of all our organisations up to the present day.

It is possible that you are not aware of your contradictory position, or, if you are aware of it, you excuse yourselves by some such argument that you want to keep the people together, that you want unity and are opposed to splitting tactics. But this kind of argument is the essence of opportunism. Any attempt at unity without a principled basis (such as is embodied in the 10-Point Programme) can only lead to confusion and political paralysis, and end in ultimate disunity. Principles are the backbone of any Movement. To put it another way: any organisation which is not founded on the rock of principles is a prey to every wind that blows. It was the failure to recognise this important fact that was primarily responsible for the fall of so many our organisations in the past. We have had large organisations which were at first hailed with enthusiasm. But they have vanished away, leaving no trace behind.

Now, M, it's time I gave you a rest, and incidentally myself, too. If you curse me for having written so long a letter, remember you have yourself to blame! I have added this last page because I think it is of paramount importance for a man, and especially a young man like yourself entering politics, to establish the habit of basing his actions on principles. He must be ready, if necessary, to swim against the stream. Thus armed, he is protected against the temptations of seeking popularity and ephemeral success.

Yours,

I. B. Tabata.

LETTER TO A. P. MDA

The letter to Mr. A. P. Mda, who, as a member of the African National Congress Youth League, was at the time a very close associate of both Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe, is being published together with the letter to Mandela to show a consistent and serious attempt by the leadership of the All-African Convention and the Unity Movement to engage in a political dialogue with the leaders of the other political groups in South Africa in the hope of bringing about principled unity amongst the oppressed people of South Africa.

80 Harrington St.

Cape Town.

12th March. 1948.

Dear Mr. Mda,

I have been thinking of writing to you since our last meeting in December, in Bloemfontein. You probably know that from there we went for a short visit to Johannesburg. I made it a point to hunt you up all over Orlando, with a view to sitting down to a proper political discussion with you. Unfortunately you were not in Johannesburg at the time. On my arrival in Cape Town I met Mr. Mandela, who was here on holiday. I had several discussions with him and was favourably impressed by him.

He struck me as an honest young man with a keen sense of his responsibilities and earnestly looking for the right road along which to lead the oppressed people. Any mistaken ideas he may have, are not due to the desire for popularity or self-aggrandisement - as is so often the case today - but rather to the lack of opportunity for proper political training.

Amongst the youth today there is a crying need for this opportunity to receive political training and the lack of it is a heritage from the past. It is only now dawning on the Africans that politics is a science and that, in the same way that a prospective lawyer or medical practitioner must submit himself to the discipline of a course of study, so he who seeks to participate in the leadership in the struggle for liberation must knuckle down to a course of training.

He who would correctly formulate the policies and programmes of struggle must be clearly aware of the forces operating for the oppression of the people - forces not only local, but world-wide in their ramifications. He must be able to distinguish between the superficial and the fundamental, the ephemeral and the permanent, between cause and effect. He must be able to recognise that, while oppression takes different forms in different countries, (sometimes for different peoples in the same country) nevertheless they have a common content and a common basis. All this demands a thorough political training.

Since the middle of February I have been in the Free State organising for the All-African Convention and for one short week-end I visited Johannesburg. Again, to my regret, I failed to find you. I met a few of your younger colleagues in the Congress Youth League. I also addressed the members of the other (independent) Youth League in Sophiatown.

I confess that I did not feel amongst your colleagues the same warmth, enthusiasm and desire to come to grips with the problems of today as I had found in Mandela. There were, it is true, only about three of them in the group I was addressing. It appeared to me that in these fellows a free, intellectual flow was inhibited by consideration of political partisanship. In the first place there was an unwillingness on the part of Sisulu to call his colleagues to meet me. He insisted that no more than three of his group should be allowed to meet me. This attitude more than surprised me, coming as it did from one who professes to be seriously looking for the right political road.

During the discussion, Mr. Sisulu seemed to be more concerned with misconstruing my words than revealing his own standpoint. Whether this was deliberate or not, I do not know. But this fact, taken in conjunction with his unwillingness to invite more than three members to meet me, casts a doubt on his seriousness and single-mindedness. I regretted that I did not meet more members of the Youth League. For what we most need is a free and open discussion of our political problems and differences on a theoretical plane. Most people told me to try and meet you, but you were too far out of my way.

I suppose you know that the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) is holding its Conference at Easter in Cape Town on the 29th, 30th and 31st March. You are entitled to send delegates.

It is my earnest desire that you will attend. If your organisation has not yet decided to affiliate to the NEUM, you are still welcome to attend as a fraternal delegate, without any obligations or commitments. Your stay here would give us an opportunity to have a full-range discussion on all aspects of our struggle.

I am looking forward to meeting you.

Yours sincerely,
I. B. TABATA.

P.S. You might have noticed in today's paper that Adv. Molteno, Native Representative in Parliament, has decided not to stand in the next elections. No wonder! He has had some pretty hard smacks from us recently. Cheers to the Boycott (of elections) Movement!