

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Progressive Nationalism Versus Nationalistic Opportunism

It is now more than twenty years since the apartheid regime crumbled and it seems that the struggles of the past are now receding into the realms of forgotten history. But it is important for us to know the past and, to understand the continuity of our struggle, how it unfolded and developed. It has been said that those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes. The powers that be today teach a completely distorted picture of the struggles of yesteryear. But more importantly, there are a number of voices on the left who have not managed to free themselves from these distortions and in one way or the other, they refer glibly to the so-called anti-apartheid struggle which reflects a misunderstanding of its real nature and thereby they continue to perpetuate these myths of the past. Therefore it is extremely important, especially for the younger generation, that we know our history and that the truth is made clear.

To begin with, we are not different from the ANC because they have obviously sold out the interests of the masses today and we believe that we have not. We have a different heritage which is determined by a particular understanding of the fundamental nature of the struggle and because it was understood that an incorrect interpretation of its nature would inevitably lead to a sell-out. In other words, we say that the ANC did not sell out after the collapse of apartheid because of perceived new opportunities for those in its leadership but because of a fundamentally flawed view of the nature of the struggle in the first place.

We are all aware that in South Africa today we are faced with a situation where there is extreme poverty for many and extreme wealth for the few and one is tempted to think that this fact alone determines the way in which we must struggle. But this situation is relative. There were similar differences in the past but only in a different context. Humanity has been involved in revolutionary struggles over a very long period of time and our struggle today is not new but in a new situation. At the same time there are revolutionary struggles taking place all over the world and it is important to be able to identify the context of each which have taken place and note the mixture of conditions that give them a particular character. Thereby we can learn the necessary lessons that can contribute to the advancement of our own struggle and how we can better understand how we are all involved in a broad, common struggle for human progress.

As a starting point, we observe that human society has progressed through tribalism, feudalism and nationalism and it is approaching internationalism in the real sense. Before that humans were only hunter-gatherers who did little to create wealth and searched the environment wherever it took them for whatever means of existence it could yield. It is only with the advent of tribalism and the development of an agricultural economy, when an economic surplus was produced that major differences in socio-economic status emerged and with it the beginnings of what we call class struggle - the struggle of the have-nots against the haves¹. An understanding of these processes is extremely important in viewing our own history.

During the epoch of tribalism there are no nations or nation states. For example, today we are commonly exposed to the idea of a Zulu nation. In truth, there was never any such thing. Zulu society of the time was based on militarism and largely, pastoralism. (Pastoralism is a cattle based economy and you must move whenever necessary to the best grazing lands while an agricultural based economy is dependent on the planting of crops which militates against such movement in order to protect the crops. It should also be noted that the agriculturally based system marks the beginning of the potential to produce a social surplus which then allows for a division of labour with a section of society now able to attend to other means and methods of production of other goods.) Hence, to return to the idea of a Zulu territory, there were no clearly marked boundaries. Boundaries could vary with every new military expedition or with a move to new pastoral lands. So at best, you could speak of a Zulu kingdom, but not a nation, which is a different kettle of fish.

¹ I omit the intervening historic period of the slave based city states as I do not think it to be essentially germane to this argument.

Under conditions of non-interference, tribalism progresses convulsively to feudalism with tribal battle-chiefs eventually elevating themselves to the ranks of princes, dukes, counts, earls and barons, each with command of his own territory - principalities, which at its peak is governed by a king. While the king is boss, nevertheless, each prince, duke, count, earl or baron is to some extent master of his own fiefdom with its own soldiery, marked by a fortified castle at the centre with a surrounding farm lands and a little village. All of this is granted by the king in return for men at arms in his own power. It is an agrarian based economy with peasants and serfs at the bottom, labouring for the master and eking out an existence for themselves in the spare time that the master will allow. Feudal economic settlements (villas) are largely self-sustaining, with peasant labourers producing all the needs of life and luxuries for the few in the surrounds of the lord's castle. The feudal lord sustains himself by the might of his personal battalion of knights which also gives its services to the king of the realm

Historically, feudalism starts to give way to capitalism with the advent of mercantilism and growing trade, where what was commonly produced in the feudal fief is no longer sufficient or the cheapest and money and trade dictates that what is not produced or best produced in a narrow local confine, must now be imported. In addition, we have the growth of independent towns where handicraftsmen or artisans are able to operate without having to worry about a source of food which is now being produced in surplus by a burgeoning rural agriculture. These artisans produce their goods for sale without consideration of whatever tribe or clan the purchasers may or may have belonged to. They later constitute themselves into guilds which are the forerunner of factories and these skilled leaders of workshops are the industrial bosses of the future. All this signals the end of closed agrarian based economic units and the birth of a broader money based economy.

As this stage was reached the feudal system stood as an obstacle to progress. Merchants were opposed to paying tolls and duties in a myriad of fiefdoms and likewise the burgeoning guilds had no use for outmoded confines of the feudal order. Free trade and private, money and private property now demanded the establishment of nation states, demolishing the old feudal and tribal law where new laws were needed. It was the birth of nationalism and there was a wave of national unifications in Europe. Firstly, each nation was ruled by a king or queen but later this too gave way to parliamentary democracy.

After capitalist nation states had been established in Europe we had the growth of capitalist imperialism and here is where things become confused. Imperialist powers conquered and established suzerainty over the less developed parts of the world and imposed borders of enforced nation states to defend their conquered territories against their imperialist rivals. They set up the norms of capitalist rule over peoples who were still mostly living in conditions of tribalism and then they saw fit to maintain the outward form of tribalism so as to divide the conquered peoples and keep them in a state of backwardness. It was nationalism and imperialism for the resident conquerors and enforced economic backwardness for the conquered.

It is in this context that we must examine the rise of progressive nationalism and national struggle in our own country. Here in particular, the matter was compounded by the introduction of indentured Indian labour and Malaysian slave labour. Could the people defeat the enemy and chase him out of the country and then revert to the tribal existence they had before? The answer is no. In the first place they simply did not have the military power to match the invader. Moreover, they could not ignore the economic advances that capitalism had brought and could only logically demand its benefits for themselves and not just the local representatives of the imperialist power. We have seen that tribalism and feudalism were obstacles to the development and progress of capitalism but now the imperialist conquerors found it expedient to destroy the democratic aspects of the tribal system while artificially maintaining its outer appearance and using it as an instrument of divide and rule - as an instrument of political oppression and economic subjugation. A reading of Tabata's "The Boycott as Weapon of Struggle" will provide a detailed account of how this technique was used in South Africa.

The Unity Movement had a very clear approach to the question of national struggle. Let me quote from one of its earliest statements : "A Declaration to the People of South Africa": "Who constitutes the South African nation? The answer to this question is as simple as it would be in any

other country. The nation consists of the people who were born in South Africa and have no other country but South Africa as their mother-land. They may have been born with a black skin or with a brown one, a yellow one or a white one; they may be male or female; they may be young, middle aged or of an advanced age; they may be short or tall, fat or lean; they may be long-headed or round-headed, straight-haired or curly-haired; they may have long noses or broad noses; they may speak Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, English or Afrikaans, Hindi, Urdu or Swahili, Arabic or Jewish; they may be Christians, Mohammedans, Buddhists or of any other faith. So long as they are born of a mother and belong to the human species, so long as they are not lunatics or incurable criminals, they all have an equal title to be citizens of South Africa, members of the nation, with the same rights, privileges and duties. In a nation it is not necessary that the people forming it should have a common language or a common culture, common customs and traditions. There are many nations where people speak different languages, consist of different nationalities with different cultures. The United States of America, Switzerland and the Soviet Union may be taken as examples. All that is required for a people to be a nation is community of interests, love of their country, pride in being citizens of their country.”

The statement goes on to outline the community of interests of the oppressed, no matter what their cultural origins. It cuts across all machinations of the rulers to divide and rule and to obfuscate the laws of historical progress. Effectively it states that while there is a South African nation in existence it is a nation for whites only and we must not look backwards but forwards to work for the establishment of an all inclusive nation. Indeed, the slogan of the Unity Movement became “We Build A Nation” which had a corollary, “They Break and Divide”

It is clear that in the conception of the Unity Movement, there are no separate races. There is only one race – the human race. It is very important to observe that according to the Unity Movement the national struggle and building the nation was not only about destroying racialism but eradicating the remnants of feudalism and tribalism that was kept alive by the ruling class.

In order to prosecute its ends the Unity Movement found it necessary to have a programme to guide it. Everything action taken by the organization became subject to an acid test – was it in accordance with the programme? This is what is known as programmatic struggle with both elected leaders and members being subject to the demands of the programme which became the yardstick whereby the leadership could be judged. .

While the UM promoted the belief in non racialism it did not blind itself to the existence of various national and tribal groups in South Africa Therefore, in the task of building the unity of the nation, it accepted the necessity of having different bodies representing the different groups. But, and this is extremely important, in the formation of the AAC and the Anti-CAD it became a condition of membership that you accepted the 10 Point Programme and all that it implied. This meant that despite the fact that the AAC organized mainly Africans and the Anti-CAD mainly coloureds, both federations were in essence non-racial, meaning that anyone could become a member, regardless of whether you were black, white, brown, yellow or blue.

The 10 Point Programme had a specific character. Firstly, it was always promoted as a minimum programme. Secondly, it was dynamically linked to the policy of non-collaboration with the oppressor and thirdly, it had a distinct transitional character with the inclusion of the agrarian problem which could not be solved under bourgeois democracy.

From here we will examine the other main organisation in the liberatory movement – The African National Congress. Let it be clear. From the outset, the leadership of the ANC accepted the myth of different races in the country. The ANC, from its birth was strictly for Africans only. No person from any other national group could become a member. A person of another race, so to say, could only join another organisation. This outlook was affirmed in the Freedom Charter, adopted in 1955. In the second clause of this charter it is stated: “All National Groups Shall have Equal Rights!

- There shall be equal status in the bodies of state, in the courts and in the schools for all national groups and races;
- All people shall have equal right to use their own languages, and to develop their own folk culture and customs;
- All national groups shall be protected by law against insults to their race and national pride;”

This last sentence in particular is very telling. It is a both defence and a promotion of racial differences in no uncertain terms. Further, without a commitment to the policy of non-collaboration, which the ANC strongly rejected, the Freedom Charter could voice no idea superior to that of the Ten Point Programme of the Unity Movement, adopted a full twelve years earlier and it was nothing more than a programme for compromise.

In the Congress alliance there were sister organisations - the Coloured People's Congress for Coloured people only, the South African Indian Congress (NIC and TIC) for Indians only and the Congress of Democrats which was reserved for whites only. These bodies were always subordinate to the ANC. Round about the middle to late fifties there was a federal body called the Congress of the People, which was supposed to unite the various racial groups. But this body disappeared when the main thrust of the ANC struggle moved into exile. It shows by the way, why the ANC did not put up too much of a fight when its recent break-away group adopted the name, COPE. The racial divisions in the Congress Alliance carried on until 1969 when at the Morogoro (Tanzania) conference of the ANC they were nominally abolished. The CPC, the SAIC and the Congress of Democrats were ostensibly dissolved and all now became members of the ANC but with the important proviso nevertheless, that the National Executive Committee could only consist of "African" members. This position of racial superiority and inferiority persisted until as late as 1985 when at its Kabwe, Zambia conference, it was conveniently jettisoned. As has become evident now, this adaptation was purely nominal.

Further to this the ANC rejected the policy of non-collaboration and it has a long history of posting candidates for dummy political bodies such as the Native Representative Council and supporting the idea of three white "native" representatives in the all white national parliament, You will recall that even as late 1983, with the birth of the UDF, pro -ANC elements still wanted it to participate in the tri-cameral parliamentary system. It should be clear that the racism, in the guise of Africanism, that is so clearly visible in the ANC today is by no means of recent, post 1994 origin. It has a long history and is endemic to that organisation.

And how did the ANC regard the national struggle? The truth is it did not have a clear vision of what national struggle meant. Now many African countries before the 1960s were governed directly by the imperialist master. Ghana, the Congo Angola and Mozambique are examples. In these countries the national struggles could easily be identified as anti-imperialist. Not so in South Africa where the country was only nominally ruled by Great Britain with a local British Governor General, prior to 1961 when Verwoerd declared the country a republic. After the Afrikaner nationalists came to power in 1948 they gave the new name of apartheid to segregation or the colour bar, signifying a more virulent application of the policy of race and divide and rule. At this point the ANC saw fit to consider the struggle as a purely anti-apartheid one. This was a fatal flaw in its policy, adopted for purely populist purposes. For them it now became a struggle, in one of its notorious slogans to "get the Nats out". To this end they organised A boycott of potatoes produced by Afrikaner farmers only and a boycott of cigarettes produced by the Anton Rupert empire. This line of reasoning implied that the liberals, who had always advocated a compromise on basic human rights, were by no means seen as enemies but sympathisers and allies in the struggle. We should perhaps elucidate that the Afrikaner nationalists of the time were largely representative of a petit bourgeois class who were fighting subjection to an white English bourgeoisie. Equally, it meant that bourgeois liberalism had a direct interest in unseating these petit-bourgeois Afrikaner nationalists. We can read more of this background in the signal document; "The PAC Venture in Perspective". But all in all, the ANC programme of fighting the Afrikaner Nats played right into the hands of the white bourgeoisie who gave it judicious support in their press as they saw fit. For the ANC, the national struggle, far from being an anti-imperialist struggle, thus became a far more limited anti-apartheid struggle. This idea of the anti-apartheid struggle was also fostered internationally with great effect, generating loads of support for the ANC. Today, the notion persists that our struggle was merely an anti-apartheid struggle, not an anti-segregation, not an anti-colour bar struggle and most importantly, not a struggle for national unity and building a nation. No, we only had to get the nasty Afrikaners out of power. This infers that it was not a struggle against imperialist rule and domination as it really was. According to the ANC, it was not a national struggle by any means. Such is the way of populist,

political opportunism.

There is one more fact that should not be ignored and it is that the ANC, in its populist approach, accepted all and sundry into its ranks with the sole proviso that an individual declares his support for the ANC, without consideration of political principle. With this approach the ANC welcomed a host of outright political opportunists into its ranks from way back when. Individuals who have had no regard for the noble tenets of struggle but only self-aggrandisement were free and welcome to join the ANC. It is not a new thing. The very OR Tambo lived a life of relative luxury and comfort in exile while today he is still touted as a self-sacrificing hero of our struggle.

All of these facts give the lie to the popularly bandied idea today that the ANC only went awry post 1992. Indeed, the whole history of the ANC and the policies it adopted only show that it was set up to perpetrate a massive sell-out in the end when we were supposed to understand that “negotiation is another site of struggle.” We do not deny that there were many cadres in the ANC who made heavy sacrifices for the struggle as they believed it. But a social struggle can never be fought on the basis of emotional hurt and anger. It can only be fought on the basis of scientific analysis. And while the South African Communist Party ostensibly provided an intellectual justification of ANC tactics and strategies it only succeeded in obfuscating and confusing the real meaning of the same.

It is clear to all that the ANC has led the country into a mess. The oppressed and exploited of today are the same under-classes as before even though they now have bourgeois democratic rights. In conditions of entrenched tribalism and still existing feudal conditions and relations in agriculture. While various people still celebrate tribalism who can say that there is no peasantry? Today, there a number of voices calling for a pure working class struggle for socialism without giving any thought to the necessity of having a clear-cut programme of transitional demands, while others who I referred to in the beginning of this address, still believe that the ANC only went wrong after 1992. For example, we have the respected Leonard Gentle, who in a recent article (*Manyi and Manuel: Why Apartheid Didn't Die .. 17 March 2011*) blandly states: “... by the 1960s all parts of the liberation movement were uncompromising in the understanding that racism was anathema and that unity was everything. This is something that struggle veteran Manuel understands. The same lesson clearly passed by Anglo-protégée, Manyi.” Now we say that simple words should not have to be taken lightly. We may or may not have sympathy for Mr Gentle in his folly but we have shown that his interpretation was certainly not the case for the ANC. For it was precisely at this time that the ANC was still wallowing in the racism of its constitution. Further, it is what Trevor Manuel clearly does not or chooses not to understand. Condoning the racism of the ANC, according to its historical attitude and behaviour contradicts a condemnation of the same thing in Jimmy Manyi’s utterances today. We say that the ANC deserves to be condemned for its racism, manifested as Africanism from its earliest days, which has led to a gross betrayal of the South African liberatory struggle.

I cannot end without referring to another question which obfuscates our history and that is the ideology espoused by the Black Consciousness Movement, glorified by the tragic martyrdom of Steve Biko. The BCM is constantly referenced in our history today, which only serves to exclude the far more fundamental role played by the Unity Movement. Let me state quite briefly that Black Consciousness was by no means an advance on ideologies that had been developed in the past. Whereas it purported to supersede the racism of the ANC and the PAC it only succeeded in mystifying the question further, albeit with some progressive acknowledgements. Today it is manifested in what has become known as Afro-centrism. Here we have a body of opinion that argues that what we need is a promotion of African values and a mystical African knowledge system which is supposed to oppose the historic influences of imperialism and Eurocentrism. These ideas are advanced by the likes of Thabo Mbeki and Malegapuru Makgoba of UKZN fame or notoriety, as you please, while the Socialist Party of Azania and AZAPO are helpless in doing any better. I do not wish to dwell on this, only to say that we totally reject the notion of a circumscribed African knowledge system. We embrace only a universal, human knowledge system whereby all peoples of the world have contributed to human advancement. We draw on the experiences, struggles and endeavours of people everywhere and as members of the human race it would be extremely foolish and stupid of us to deny this right and heritage.

Finally, there is nothing new in most of what I have said here except in reference to new circumstances and events. Otherwise, all of the ideas, precepts and historical analyses that I have presented are documented, and probably much better at that, in the literature of the movement. What I have attempted to emphasise is the importance of a scientifically correct analysis of the historic circumstances of our struggle, both in the past and in the present day. It leads to what is known as principled struggle and it is along this path that we must continue at all costs.

R Wilcox April 2011