

BIKO — THE MAN

Peter 'PC' Jones was released from security police detention on 25 September 1984. We have pleasure in including this tribute to Biko which we could not include in *Frank Talk* Volume 1 Number 4.

One of the important annual events on the BLACK CALENDAR is BC-WEEK (6-12 September). During this week the Black Consciousness Movement remembers one of its greatest fathers and visionaries — Bantu Steve Biko. Various programmes are presented to illuminate various aspects of Black Consciousness to the Black community. Much has been written about Steve's calibre and capacity for political leadership — many truths and many lies have been spoken by many who claimed to have had some obscure (and to those of us who were close to him — unknown) personal relationship with the man. In this article I want to reflect on some of my own experiences and the events that ultimately led to that fateful night on the 18 August 1977, when Steve and I were arrested.

INTRODUCTION

By the time I had to move to King William's Town in January 1977, I had known Steve for seven years. During the late part of 1969 I had become aware of Black Consciousness as a philosophy of resistance, and together with a handful of students at the University of the Western Cape and Hewat Training College, we launched an off-campus branch of SASO in 1970. Together with the official delegates of the branch I attended the General Students Council of that year, hosted by the Natal University Medical School (Black Section). During 1974 (after having left university in 1971 and going through a period of community work and activism as a member of the Black Peoples' Convention), I was appointed Western Cape Regional Organizer. In this capacity I had to travel around the country frequently and had to consult with Steve, who was then banned to King William's Town, from time to time. The 1975 BPC Congress was a major victory for the Movement in more ways than one. Although the entire leadership of SASO/BPC were in detention or banned we were still able to elect a capable National Executive, headed by Hlaku Kenneth Rachidi. We also made tremendous strides in the entire Eastern Cape region, by defiantly having congress in Ginsberg location, King William's Town and by allowing all and sundry access to our open sessions.

The next year 1976, whilst we were leading a national initiative to protest and organise against the October 26 'Independence' of Transkei, the uprising that started on 16 June in Soweto became a ready-made excuse for the State to remove the entire leadership of the BCM, and many others, by detaining them for many months. We believed the real motive for the mass deten-

tions was the State's desire to ensure the peaceful implementation of one of the cornerstones of apartheid policy — balkanisation of the land (the one issue that certainly strikes the deepest chord in the hearts and souls of the dispossessed people).

After our release at the end of 1976, Mxolisi Mvovo (vice-president of BPC), Malusi Mpumlwana and myself spent three weeks travelling around the country, convening and arranging an emergency congress for January 1977 in Durban. This congress, held defiantly whilst security police were still jittery and the national executive were still in detention, was another milestone in the turbulent history of the BCM. The national executive was extended to include secretariates in various fields, full-time regional organisers were appointed, and amidst common consensus that the movement had the duty to formally and officially utilise the capacities of its banned leadership, Steve was appointed Honorary President of BPC.

1977 was the most active year in the history of the BCM. A defiant anti-Bophuthatswana Puppetstan Rally was held at Pietersburg in June, there was a massive increase in branches in Durban and rural Natal came to life again after the devastation following the Pro-Frelimo rally in 1974 — BCM was riding the crest of its political wave!!

KING WILLIAM'S TOWN

After the January 1977 congress, at which I was elected to the post of National Secretary of Economics and Finance (police used to call me "Minister van Finansies"), I moved to King William's Town to take up the position of financial administrator for the Black Community Programmes. The following two months saw a running battle with security police in King William's Town and we were almost constantly speculating as to which of our senior personnel was next on the banning list.

In quick succession we lost the services of Dr Mamphela Ramphele (Branch Executive — Eastern Cape), Mxolisi Mvovo (National Distributor of the products from our home industries and simultaneously regional organiser for BPC), Thami Zani (Research Director and simultaneously Publicity Secretary for BPC), who were all banned, and Malusi Mpumlwana (Editor, **Black Review** publications), who was arrested and detained under section 6 of the Terrorism Act. I became adminis-

trator and had to supervise all projects of BCP in the region which included Zanempilo Community Health Centre in Zinyoka, the office with its library and resource centre in King William's Town and a leather home industry in Umtata. Some new personnel had to be appointed and at times we had to "import" people such as Asha Rambally from Durban (Research), but we always had Steve to refer to and consult with, even though his banning order specifically precluded him from working for BCP.

THE MAN

Bantu Steve Biko was an enigmatic and exciting person. I have never before met a man filled with so much capacity and capability, at the same time so humble, and filled with all the shortcomings and faults of ordinary man.

As a black political leader, his calibre and bearing must certainly rank him with the best, if not better than any the liberation movement had produced. His command of political diplomacy resulted on the one hand in his becoming one of the most sought after targets for international visitors and opinion makers, and on the other caused him to acquire all sorts of derogatory adjectives from those who had only newspaper reports to form opinions about him. Steve's policy with visitors of any kind (including security police and imperialist agents) was to confer on them traditional courtesy by inviting them into his house — and thereafter informing them exactly what his opinions were. This he was able to handle so superbly that those he insulted — normally liberals — felt so good about it, they would come back for more.

There was a time when Steve was permitted to travel to East London airport to receive USA Senator Clarke (this resulted in some jealous 'black' politicians quietly calling him a liberal and imperialist collaborator). His main point of emphasis was to inform blacks that it was unlikely that the Black Consciousness Movement would in future be willing to speak to American leaders unless they conceded that the Black political leadership recognised as such by the Black community included the leaders who were jailed and banned or exiled. The point was also made that only certain governments (western powers) had access to interaction and communication with Black political leaders.

The BCM leadership had complete faith in Steve and consulted with him on most matters. After his election as Honorary President of BPC, Steve submitted willingly to the dictates of organisational discipline and never once made mockery of the tradition in BC of collective leadership. He constantly consulted Zani and myself at King William's Town and was prepared to accept our advice on the national mood and the public image of the Movement.

At his house Steve demonstrated such comprehension and sympathy for people and their experiences, that he was consulted by young and old alike. Politicians all over the Eastern Cape and Transkei consulted with him and he became generally respected for his grasp of issues and people. I remember that in Ginsberg, a location notorious for its bad dirt roads, there had always been great unemployment. A young group of unemployed men extremely politically conscious mainly because of their constant proximity to Steve, acquired the name 'Cubans' because of this. We immediately knew that the 'Cubans' had had a good (pick-pocketing) day if we were offered free refreshments upon entry at 'Sis Kolla's' shebeen. The 'Cubans' also ensured that it became almost impossible for police to arrest Steve in the location unless they had at least a small army to do it. I recently met one of the ex-'Cubans' and it came as no surprise to learn that after Steve's death, he had developed into a strong and dedicated trade union leader.

Within his family, Steve was the head, even though he had one elder brother and three elder sisters. Until his departure on that fatal last trip Steve, together with his wife Ntsiki and two sons Nkosinathi and Samora, lived with his mother, and he had come to care for her. His mother greatly depended on his patience to resolve family disputes, and to keep the family close together.

BETRAYAL

By 1977 Steve became the symbolic head of the national BC initiative that had started as early as 1974. This initiative grew from the conviction that the liberation movement was under an obligation to itself and its people to establish a machinery for the most effective unity of the historical liberation movements of Azania. Suffice it to say at this stage that the issue then was to set in motion a long-term process whereby all participants in the struggle for liberation were to be afforded an opportunity to address themselves firstly to the principle of unity; and thereafter hopefully to deal with the mechanics of such unity. It was common national consensus that the BC Movement was the only liberation movement that was not riven by the traditional animosities that had kept the historical organizations apart, and that it was therefore the only

logical agent in a dialogue of such a nature.

1977 was a year of great optimism. After a number of years of inquiring and opinion gathering, it became clear that even for public statements that did not clearly underscore this position, there was growing consensus and acceptance of the need to address the question of unity.

The trip that Steve and I made to Cape Town on 16 August 1977 was primarily part of the above programme — we had accepted the necessarily serious consequences if our business was exposed, but we took the risks willingly. Steve was at that time banned to King William's Town. Of course, whilst in Cape Town Steve and I were scheduled to meet, amongst others, a representative or representatives of a group purporting to act for the Unity Movement or, at worst, a significant grouping within those ranks. (We now realize that this was a lie, and that these people were the only ones we did not really know).

We had also made arrangements to consult with our Cape Town BC leadership, who at the time were making serious noises about relinquishing their BPC membership. Subsequent experiences made us aware that a number of these elements had started to dine at the poisonous side-table of the white "left", and that they were "progressing" quite fast into becoming "progressives". But this was a side issue.

On our arrival in Cape Town we learnt that the "Unity Movement" group was under "discipline" not to see Steve until certain "political issues" surrounding him and the BC Movement had been cleared. Reference was made to some silly article at the time by Donald Woods in the **Daily Despatch** speculating about the growing "Black" movements like BCM and Inkatha. (This article had nothing to do with BCM or Steve, but represented the views of Woods who displayed typical white hero-worship of Steve — the Man). Later that same night a fellow-traveller of this group, shocked by what he regarded as callous disregard for traditional courtesy, insisted that Steve accompany him to the house of the spokesman. He was further shocked when he alone was invited in for an explanation which took two hours, whilst Steve sat outside in the car. Steve later remarked that if it was not for the fact that he did not know Cape Town, he would have walked to wherever I was. To Steve who was a diplomat and at times a sentimentalist, this indignity certainly rocked his African soul.

When Steve finally returned to where I was, and we agreed that our whole visit up till then which was supposed to have been very secretive appeared to be known to many more people than we expected, we

decided to immediately abandon, without notice to anyone, our visit, and return home, from the safety of which we would attempt to understand the Cape Town experience, the seeming inexplicabilities and outright suspicious behaviour of some persons.

We left the morning of the 18 August and drove straight into the roadblock at Grahamstown at about 9.30 that evening. Subsequent experiences did not convince me that the police had known of our whereabouts or that the roadblock was intended for us. One thing was certain, however, that if it was not for treacherous behaviour of the Cape Town participants, we would never have been on the road on the 18th, the day that we should have known that there was due to be unrest in and around port Elizabeth — it was on 18 August 1976 that PE's unrest started and it was on its anniversary that we hurriedly left Cape Town.

The arrest of Steve and myself, his subsequent death, the information gathered by security police through the detention of ourselves and many others, and the subsequent banning of all our organisations — effectively interrupted a process that may take many years before conditions permit it to be resumed once again.

A strange occurrence is taking place today. Exactly the same people who spearheaded the above abortion are today being seen flirting with the BCM most ostentatiously.

LAID TO REST

Steve's death to those of us who were in the Eastern Cape in solitary confinement was a traumatic experience. When, after almost 6 months in solitary, we were all able to be together in Grahamstown Prison in "preventative detention" my report to the others filled them with disgust and bitterness.



Biko's mother

I returned to King William's Town on New Year's eve last year (1983) — six years after our arrest. "Manceda's" (Steve's mother) testimony to me was shattering. She told me that she had never accepted Steve's death — it was all so unreal to her. That night we left her house just to go "somewhere" and she felt uneasy — it was only when she had been able to see me once again, that she was prepared to release him, and lay him to rest.