

THE GAINS FOR THE DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT FROM THE KENNEDY VISIT

Senator Edward Kennedy's visit to South Africa opened up debate in the ranks of those opposed to apartheid on the question of international relations.

The lack of coherence within the democratic movement allowed the state to exploit divisions and to use opposition to the tour for its own ends. As Bishop Tutu commented: "I'm surprised that an organisation like Azapo should allow itself to play into the hands of the white rightwing. How do you explain a situation where the SABC sings praises for Azapo?"

But, in contrast to the commercial press, our analysis of the impact of his visit should not focus only on the divisions it caused in opposition groups.

The Kennedy tour served to draw international attention to some of the horrors of apartheid rule. It focussed local and world attention on the bancrupsy of the Reagan government's policy of constructive engagement. It ~~expanded~~^{broadened} support for sanctions against South Africa. It strengthened the international image of the UDF and re-affirmed the leadership of the likes of Mandela and Tambo, ~~in South Africa~~.

So it is no wonder that despite the divisions his visit created the government decided to refuse Jesse Jackson a visa ~~a month~~ after having granted him one. *a month earlier -*

The point is that at times we need to accept that it may be in the UDF's interests to establish contact with governments, organisations and individuals who will not travel the whole road with us, and whose motives don't co-incide with ours entirely. We need to exploit divisions in the

enemy camp and to make it harder for reactionary governments to collaborate with the apartheid state.

Creatively making use of all opportunities available to us does not imply opportunism. We enter alliances when they ^{serve} ~~service~~ the interests of the national liberation movement, and when they do not threaten our control over the direction of our struggle.

Before looking at the Kennedy visit specifically, I would like to touch on two other recent examples of the UDF and international relations: The Consulate 6 strategy and the visit by the British Labour Party MP, Donald Anderson.

Azapo, and certain other groups, tend to see only one shade of imperialism. And they've treated what they term imperialism rather as they might treat herpes ... even a little ~~o~~contact taints you for life.

Others have claimed to be taking a more 'strategic' or 'tactical' approach, but in their blanket rejection of the Consulate 6 strategy, the Anderson visit and the Kennedy visit, have come dangerously close to establishing a rigid and unworkable principle in their zeal to 'protect the masses from dangerous influences'.

When the 6 UDF leaders emerged from underground to occupy the British consulate in order to avoid their detention orders, they were met with the shrill cry of 'collaboration' from some quarters.

For example, before giving himself up to the police Kader Hassim of Apdusa said he didn't want to go into the consulate because he did not want to give Britain the opportunity of appearing to be the champion of South Africa's oppressed.

In fact, one of the achievements of the Consulate strategy was to demonstrate to South Africa and the world exactly where the Thatcher government stood, while at the same time driving a wedge between the Botha and Thatcher regimes and within the Western 5 grouping, focussing attention on detentions and creating publicity for the aims and demands of the UDF. It also provided the UDF with a breathing space after it had taken severe knocks from the post-election state onslaught.

Similarly, the effect of Anderson's visit was to provide extensive coverage of the situation in the Vaal, as well as capitalising on the gains made by the Consulate 6. It allowed the UDF to put its case in the media as never before. And it strengthened the resolve of the Labour party to isolate South Africa.

In a book entitled 'Left Wing Communism - an infantile disorder', Lenin

criticised Dutch and German ultra leftists whose arguments on international relations in many ways parallel those of Azapo and other isolationists in South Africa today.

He wrote: "To carry on a war for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie, ... and to renounce in advance any change of tack, or any utilisation of a conflict of interests (even if temporary) among ones enemies, or any compromise with possible allies (even if temporary, unstable, vacillating or conditional allies) ... is this not ridiculous in the extreme? Is it not like making a difficult ascent of an unexplored and previously inaccessible mountain and refusing in advance ever to move in zig zags, ever to retrace ones steps, or even to abandon a course once selected, and to try others?"

And he went on to say: "The more powerful enemy can be vanquished only by exerting the utmost effort, and by the most thorough, careful, attentive, skilful and obligatory use of any, even the smallest, rift between the enemies, and any conflict of interest among the bourgeoisie of the various countries and among the various types of bourgeoisie within the various countries....

"Those who have not proved in practice, over a fairly considerable period of time and in fairly varied political situations, their ability to apply this truth have not yet learnt to help the revolutionary class in its struggle to emancipate all toiling humanity from the exploiters."

So if we accept this approach how do we apply it to the Kennedy visit? For a start we must not let our assessment of it be clouded by our abhorance for American baby-kissing politics or by our distaste for

Kennedy's personal style. These factors are relevant, but do not form the essence of the debate.

But what of his political record and motives? His international record is mixed from our point of view. On the one hand, for example, he has always supported the Israeli regime. On the other hand he opposed the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, gave tentative support to the Sandanistas in the last days of their struggle to seize state power, and has vehemently opposed the CIA's role in Latin America.

If Kennedy is such a mixed bag, why support his visit? Part of the answer is provided, I believe, in the following statement from one of the UDF affiliates, the Soweto Civic.

"The efforts of Dr Boesak and Bishop Tutu to expose through the Kennedy visit the plight of our people at Nancefield hostel, at Crossroads and Onverwacht deserves recognition.

"Though we do not believe that Senator Kennedy is going to liberate us, the Reagan/Kennedy contradiction can be exploited to highlight the need for complete isolation of the apartheid regime at an international level."

It is perhaps for this reason that Kennedy's visit was so enthusiastically supported by Swapo and the ANC.

Swapo sent a welcoming committee of over 1 000 members to greet him, after which a top-level Swapo delegation talked with him for nearly 3 hours. The ANC not only publically expressed its support for his visit 6 weeks before he arrived, but also sent a senior delegation led by Oliver Tambo to meet him in Lusaka. According to the City Press the ANC described

the talks as, "highly significant and successful in terms of attempts to isolate the Botha government internationally", and they spoke of him as an 'ally'.

Unlike the situation when Robert Kennedy visited South Africa, the political agenda of Edward Kennedy's visit was set by the strength of the opposition forces operating here. This meant that Edward Kennedy's ability to seize the initiative from the democratic movement was severely curtailed.

In contrast, when Robert Kennedy toured here in 1966 democratic organisation was virtually non-existent. He could, and did, present himself as a saviour from overseas, and his speeches and actions were guided by the dynamics of white politics.

But 18 years later the situation has changed dramatically. We were not spectators watching a side show and it was Kennedy who had to adapt to our needs and demands.

To take one example. At a mass meeting in Cape Town he shared a platform with UDF President, Oscar Mphetha. Many inside and outside of the UDF criticised this move for giving credence to imperialism.

But when Kennedy denounced those who "foolishly treated the Soviet Union and its allies as a model", the crowd of 5 000, led by Mphetha, broke into singing "Soviet People, Cuban People". *< Ken unfurled the ANC's green, black & gold flag*

The point is that whatever his motives, Kennedy did not have a free reign, which is why he spoke of Mandela, Tambo, Boesak, Tutu and Beyers Naude as the real leaders.

And when he met with Tambo, admittedly after personally distancing himself from violence, he said. "Those who make peaceful evolution impossible, make violent revolution inevitable". Hardly words likely to cause a rift between the UDF and the liberation movements, as some have feared.

But, some critics ask, what of the confusion of the masses?

Firstly, it needs to be stressed that Kennedy did not, and could not, present himself as a liberator. To retain any credibility he had no alternative but to present the likes of Mandela, Tambo and the UDF as the liberators.

As Kennedy himself put it: "I do not believe that outsiders can impose a specific system ... My greatest hope is that South Africa will free

itself".

Secondly, I believe we should not underestimate the intelligence of the masses. I don't believe Kennedy's visit had the potential to dupe anyone into seeing him as the ultimate solution to their problems, because he was never presented as anything other than one who could assist in isolating the apartheid government.

So if he were to become US president and take a more conciliatory line on the South African government, there is no reason why the democratic forces could not speak out against him. He was never seen, or presented as anything more than a "temporary, vacillating, unstable and conditional" ... but very useful -- ally.

Thirdly, it needs to be recognised that our struggle has a long and deep anti-imperialist tradition, one which has been accentuated by the actions of the Thatcher and Reagan regimes and has not simply remained at a leader-

ship level. There is no contradiction in being vigilant in opposing imperialism in general and constructive engagement in particular and at the same time recognising the strategic gains to be made from a visit like Kennedy's.

It needs to be re-asserted just what was at stake in the international arena with Kennedy's visit.

Perhaps its most significant impact will be on the US government's Southern African policy. Constructive engagement is under fire to put it mildly. Never before has apartheid been a central issue in the United States.

The disinvestment and anti-apartheid demonstrations have placed enormous pressures on the Reagan regime.

The Democrats have rejected constructive engagement outright while the Republicans are finding it increasingly difficult to live with.

While it is true that our struggle will be won or lost by our actions within the country, the international arena remains of crucial significance. The importance of the isolation of the apartheid regime should not be underestimated.

The aim of the Thatcher/Reagan Southern African policy is to break South Africa's isolation and allow the apartheid government leeway to pursue its policies on its own terms. The dangers this policy presents to our struggle need to be stressed. Constructive engagement was one of the pillars on which the Nkomati Accord was built.

Therefore, while we recognise that the motives of those in the international arena opposed to constructive engagement are not always the same as ours,

it would be highly irresponsible for us not to make use of even the smallest conflict of interests within and between the imperialist powers on this issue. Kennedy's visit was useful in this respect.

And we should not underestimate the extent to which the visit influenced Kennedy himself. He has returned more vigilant in his support for our leaders, he has openly expressed his support for sanctions against South Africa, and in line with the American anti-apartheid movement he has placed the South African issue firmly in the forefront of the Senate's agenda.

The effect of this will be to significantly contribute to exposing the underlying aims of constructive engagement and to reduce the capacity of the Reagan administration to give outright support for the South African government.

While Kennedy's visit was certainly not positive in an unqualified way, I believe the gains outweighed the losses. Many of the losses were caused by the division in our ranks over how to handle his presence here. In some ways it was a lost opportunity because, through our confusion we failed to take full advantage of it.