

29.1.1990

PREPARING FOR AN ANC CONSULTATIVE CONFERENCE

1. The Roma Branch of the African National Congress, Lusaka, asked me to write a note on some of the issues relating to the forthcoming conference for discussion at the next branch meeting. Before discussing these, I shall trace briefly the history of the decision to hold such a conference in exile.
2. When the racist regime declared the ANC to be unlawful in 1960, Congress leaders decided to continue the struggle in defiance of the ban. The constitution of 1958 was shelved, new structures were formed, and a wide gap opened between the resistance in South Africa and the movement in exile, in spite of a continuity of aims and agreement on strategy.
3. Congress held a conference in Lobatsi, Botswana, in October 1962, the first since 1959. Next came the 'consultative conference', held in Morogoro, Tanzania in April-May 1969. It was attended by over 70 delegates from ANC branches and MK units, Indian and Coloured leaders, and the revolutionary working class. It elected new officials, created a presidential council, and agreed on the integration of non-Africans in the ANC on the basis of individual equality. The NEC, however, would continue to consist of Africans only.
4. The Second National Consultative Conference took place in Zambia from the 16th to 22nd June, 1985. It was attended by about 250 delegates representing the entire organisation and drawn from all South Africa's national groups. They adopted a set of rules to guide Congress, which conference decided, should hold consultations of the same kind at least once in five years, while the NEC would hold office for the same period. Its size was increased from 22 to 30 members. Another five could be co-opted by the executive if it saw fit.
5. A procedure followed at the second consultative conference caused concern among some members of the Roma Branch. They questioned the wisdom and correctness of the 'President's List', of some 40 names of delegates recommended as suitable for NEC membership. The issue was not debated at the branch meeting, but is important enough to justify a comment by me as an active participant in the proceedings.

6. The President explained that he had drawn up the list at the request of delegates from MK units in the West, who had told him that many of their fellow delegates were unknown to them. They asked for guidance and welcomed the list, which the President prepared in consultation with senior officials and perhaps others. For instance, he asked me if I wanted my name included. I declined the honour; but as one of the scrutineers found that a substantial number of delegates had voted for me and many others not on the list. Its influence was, however, considerable. Three-quarters of the new NEC were included in the list.

7. Did the list violate democratic principles and ANC procedures? As regards the latter, our best term of reference is the 1958 constitution, which lays down rules for the election at the annual national conference of the NEC. Clause 9(e) states that 'Nominations shall be by delegates at the Conference; and elections of all officials and members of the National Executive Committee shall be by ballot'. This practice was followed in 1985 to the letter. If the Branch considers that it was undemocratic, it might consider how to avoid a repetition at the next conference. In doing so, it should take into account the composition of branches in the Lusaka region and the method of electing delegates.

8. The 1958 constitution is very explicit on this point. Clause 20 states that 'The basic unit of organisation in the Congress shall be the branch' prescribes its composition (it shall have at least 20 members), and sets out its procedures and functions. (See ANC Speaks, 1977, 26-43, for the text. An annual general meeting of branch members is required to elect a committee consisting of a chairman, secretary, treasurer and six other members. It should report regularly to the regional committee, collect subscriptions, send $\frac{1}{3}$ to the provincial treasurer and another $\frac{1}{3}$ to the national treasurer, enrol and discipline members.

9. A branch committee can reprimand, suspend or expel a member for breach of rules, or behaviour detrimental to the interests of Congress and the African people. The same disciplinary powers are vested in the regional, provincial and national executives, and provide a partial solution to the problem of 'accountability' which bothers some of our branch members.

Needless to say, our present state of organisation provides little scope for punitive action. There is widespread agreement among responsible members that discipline and morale stand in urgent need of an overhaul which would enable branches to detect and flush out scroungers, infiltrators, spies and camp followers who contribute nothing of value and regard the ANC as a grand meal ticket - the universal provider !

There isn't much that the Branch can do improve the condition of membership in the region, other than set an example by cleaning out its own stables. I suggest we appoint a sub-committee to sort out the good from the bad and indifferent in our own ranks, issue those we approve of with membership cards, and ask the Department of Manpower Development (DMD) to give a hand.

10. The issue of membership cards, signed by the Treasurer-General and endorsed by the branch secretary, is provided for in clause 5(d) of the 1958 constitution.

Looking ahead, hopefully to the near future, we ought to prepare for the return to legitimacy, unbanned and without a state of emergency hanging over us. Our members, at home and abroad, will become the shock troop, mobilised in a campaign to recruit suitable candidates for a party, the African National Congress Party, which will hold its own in competition with rivals and prepare for participation in parliamentary elections.

The issue of membership cards, supported if possible with a photograph, is necessary to provide documentary evidence of an ANC identity. It will facilitate the task of separating the sheep from the goats, and make a useful contribution to the adoption of a new constitution for the Congress Party.

11. One more point calls for comment. It was raised by some members at the branch meeting on 28 January. They suggested that our delegates to the conference should be mandated to speak and vote for resolutions put forward by the branch. This issue is widely debated in parliamentary circles. One opinion is that members of the party caucus should toe the line and support the majority view; an opposing opinion is that they should vote according to their conscience and understanding of the pros and cons put forward in the debate.

ANC conference delegates may represent different interest groups, but these are not factions. We share a common purpose and structure. Delegates have a right to speak and vote freely while putting the branch resolutions on the agenda.

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