

# O.R. TAMBO

## 1917 - 1993

### HAMBA KAHLE PEOPLE'S LEADER

**Brother, comrade,  
friend and colleague**

**A tribute to O.R. Tambo  
by Nelson Mandela,  
President of the ANC**

Comrade O.R. has been with me since the 1930s when we were students at Fort Hare. He was my brother, my comrade, my friend and my colleague. A scientist who passed his B.Sc at Fort Hare, he became one of the successful lawyers in this city and thereafter plunged into politics.

One of the most striking features about him was his quiet efficiency and the way he eschewed all kinds of publicity and personal praise. It is no exaggeration when I say, if I quarrelled with him throughout the decades in which we have worked closely together, I would have seriously examined the question whether I was not responsible for that quarrel.

During the 30 years in which I and my comrades were in prison, Cde O.R. was the standard bearer of our organisation and all the traditions which it represents. I will not go into any details about his political contribution. His loss will not only be felt by his family, organisation and other friends inside and outside the country. I will feel it in a unique manner because his death closes a chapter in the history of our organisation.

Today we have adopted negotiations as one of our principal strategies. Once OR had accepted the necessity for negotiations he went out full steam to mobilise the membership, the public in SA and the world to support this strategy. He is closely associated with the Harare Declaration which was adopted in 1989 in which this strategy was set down. In fact his health broke down because he went around Africa and the world mobilising the international community to support the struggle.

He was a father figure who not only held the organisation together at a very difficult time but he succeeded in developing the organisation to become the strongest political force in this country. We owe him a debt which I will find difficult to pay.

I went to see him in hospital and I spent a few moments with him alone. I looked at his face and, in death, he retained some of the virtues for which he has become very famous. Looking at him it was difficult to believe that this man was no more, because written across the face was one of a man who went to sleep for eternity, at peace with himself and the world.



**Oliver Tambo died at 3.10am on the 24 April at the Milpark Hospital. He was admitted to hospital the previous day for observation of a chest infection. He was in no distress. In the early hours of the morning O. R. Tambo unexpectedly suffered a severe stroke. The doctors in attendance were unable to resuscitate him.**

**O.R. Tambo is survived by his wife Adelaide, children Tembi, Dali, Tselane, and three grandchildren.**

# Oliver Reginald Tambo: **A brief biography**

**B**orn in 1917, five years after the birth of the ANC, Oliver Reginald Tambo spent most of his life serving the struggle against apartheid.

The son of a peasant farmer, he was born and grew up in the rural town Bizana in eastern Pondoland. After attending primary school at mission schools in the district, he went to St Peters College in Rosettenville, Johannesburg.

Tambo first became politically active as a student at Fort Hare University, where he obtained his B.Sc in 1941. He was expelled shortly afterwards for leading a class boycott to demand a democratic Students' Representative Council.

In 1942, Tambo returned to St Peters College to teach science and mathematics. He threw himself body and soul into the ANC. In 1944, he was among the founding members of the ANC Youth League and became its first National Secretary. He was elected President of the Transvaal Youth League in 1948 and National Vice-President in 1949.

## **YOUTH LEAGUE**

In the Youth League, Tambo teamed up with Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, and others to bring a bold, new spirit of militancy into the ANC. In 1946 he was elected onto the Transvaal Executive of the ANC. In 1948 Tambo and Sisulu were elected onto the ANC's National Executive Committee.

Influenced by the Youth League, the ANC adopted a militant Programme of Action in 1949. Tambo served on the committee that drew up the Programme of Action which called for civil disobedience, strikes, boycotts and other forms of non-violent resistance to fight apartheid. The Programme of Action led to the Defiance Campaign in 1952 and transformed the ANC into a mass organisation.

At the beginning of the 1950's, Tambo and Mandela set up their own legal firm. The firm soon became known as a champion of the



*(Above) With Nelson Mandela, Sweden 1990. (Below) Flanked by Angela Davis and Father Trevor Huddleston.*

poor, and of victims of apartheid laws, with little or no money to pay their legal costs.

Oliver Tambo was among the numerous volunteers who courted imprisonment by deliberately breaking apartheid laws in the Defiance Campaign. His law firm partner and colleague, Nelson Mandela, was the National Volunteer-in-Chief.

In 1955, Tambo was appointed Secretary-General of the ANC, to replace Walter Sisulu who had been banned. He played a major role in organising the Congress of the People, where the Freedom Charter was adopted. He was also among the 156 leaders accused in the subsequent marathon Treason Trial in 1956.

## **INTERNATIONAL MISSION**

Oliver Tambo became the Deputy-President of the ANC in 1958. After the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, he was designated by the ANC to travel abroad to set up the ANC's

international mission and mobilise international support against apartheid. Together with Dr Yusuf Dadoo he established the South African United Front, which secured the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth in 1961.

Assisted by African governments, Tambo established ANC missions in Egypt, Ghana, Morocco and London. From these small beginnings, under his leadership the ANC acquired missions in 27 countries by 1990.

He also worked tirelessly to secure the co-operation of numerous African governments in providing training and camp facilities for Umkhonto weSizwe.

O.R. Tambo became acting President of the ANC in 1967, after the death of ANC President General Chief Albert J. Luthuli, and was elected President by the Morogoro Conference in 1969. He became the key figure in the ANC's Revolutionary Council (RC) set up at the Morogoro Conference to



rebuild the ANC's internal machinery and to improve its underground capacity.

#### ALTERNATIVE TO PRETORIA

During the 1970s Oliver Tambo's international prestige rose immensely as he crossed the world, addressing the United Nations and other international gatherings. Among black South African leaders, Oliver Tambo is probably the most highly respected on the African continent, in Europe, Asia and the Americas. During his leadership of the ANC he raised its international prestige and status to that of an alternative to the Pretoria Government. He was received with the pro-

tol reserved for Heads of State in many parts of the world.

In 1985 Tambo was re-elected ANC President at the Kabwe Conference. He also served as the Head of the Politico-Military Council (PMC) of the ANC, and as Commander in Chief of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

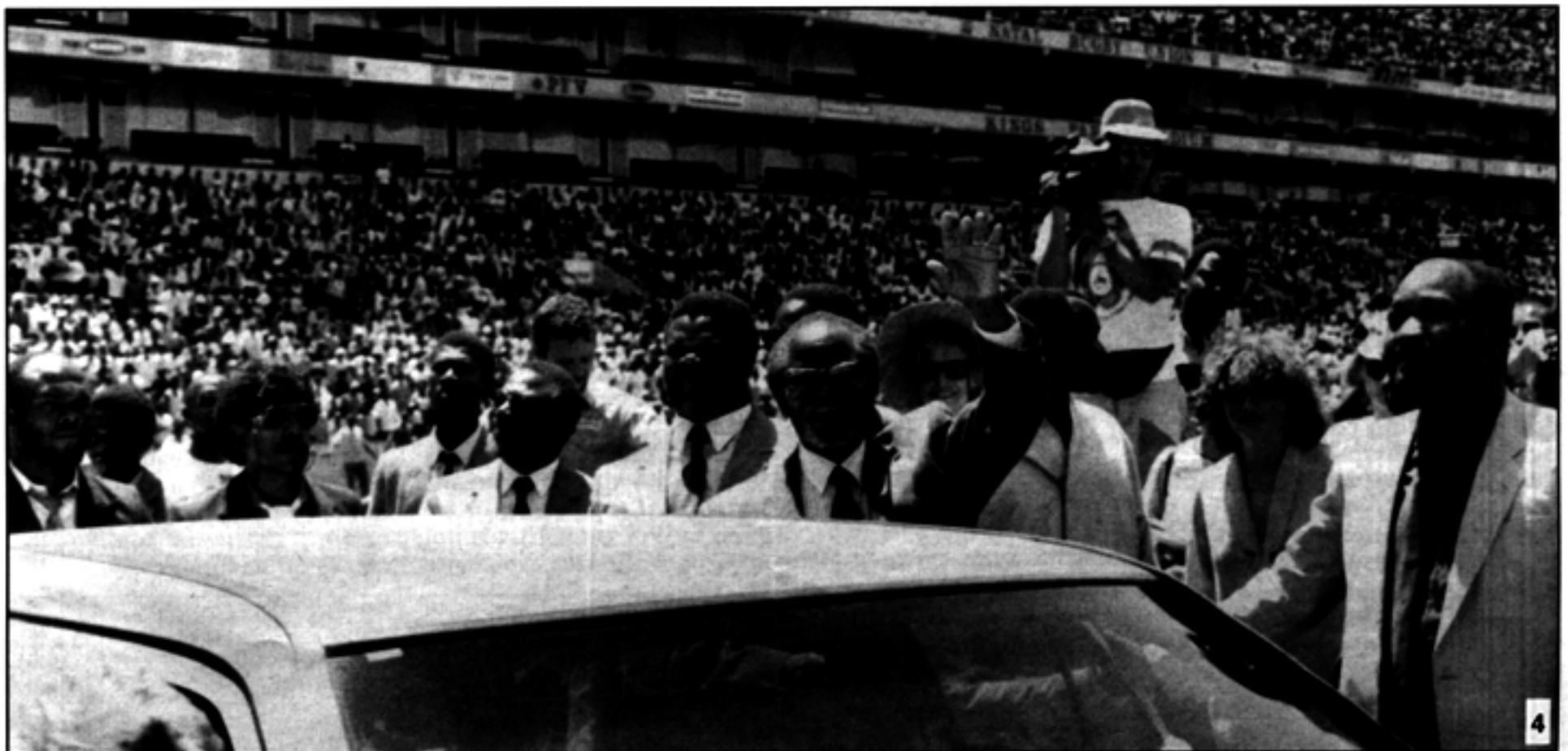
During his years in the ANC, Oliver Tambo played a major role in the growth and development of the movement and its policies. Alongside Mandela and Sisulu, he was in the

forefront of transforming the ANC into a radical national liberation movement.

In 1989 Oliver Tambo suffered a stroke, and underwent extensive medical treatment. He returned to South Africa in 1991, after over three decades in exile. At the ANC's first legal national conference inside South Africa, held in Durban in July 1991, Tambo was elected National Chairperson of the ANC.

Oliver Reginald Tambo died from a stroke at 3.10am on 24 April, 1993.

1. 8 January 1988, Lusaka. 2. With MK soldiers, Uganda, 1993. 3. O.R. (4th from left) with Luthuli and Mabhida (2nd and 1st from right) at the 1958 ANC Conference. 4. Welcome home rally, Durban, after his return in 1990.



# OLIVER TAMBO SPEAKS

## CONFIDENCE IN VICTORY, 1955

Colonialism will be overthrown. It will take longer in some countries than others. Nowhere will freedom come about independently of the people's struggles, and everywhere the colonial and master powers will fight bitterly to retain their possessions. But everywhere the people's movements are growing, developing, maturing; new militant forms of struggle are adopted; a new determination is growing among the people...

## FREEDOM CHARTER, 1955

The Freedom Charter was not just another political document, the Congress of the People just another conference. The Freedom Charter is the sum total of our aspirations, but more: it is the road to new life. It is the uniting creed of all the people struggling for democracy and for their rights; the mirror of the future South Africa... The Charter is no patchwork collection of demands, no jumble of reforms. The ten clauses of the Charter cover all aspects of the lives of the people.

## THE NATIONAL INTEREST, 1963

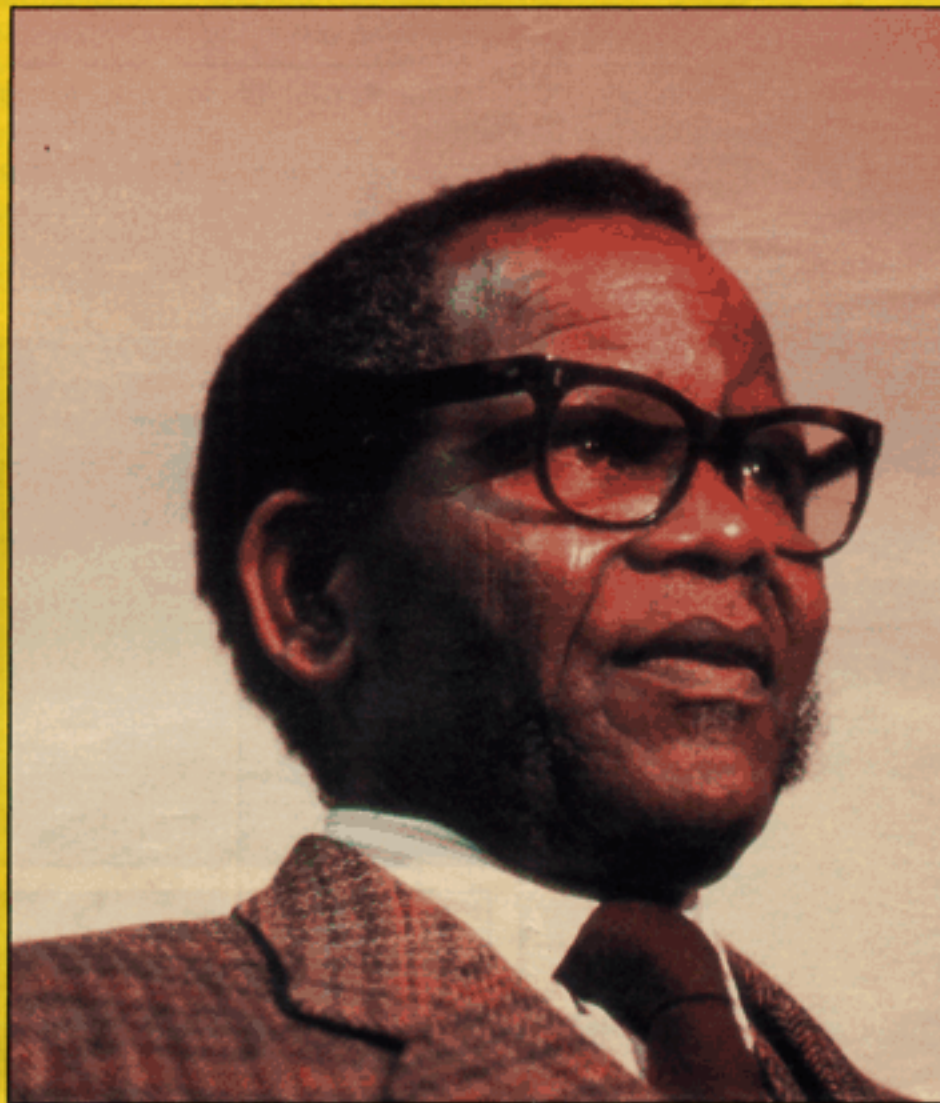
Every single day spent in gaol by any of our people, every drop of blood drawn from any of them, and every life taken - each of these represents a unit of human worth lost to us. This loss we can no longer afford. It is surely not in the interests of South Africa or even of the South African government that this loss should be increased even further.

## RADICAL CHANGE, 1975

The changes we seek in South Africa are not encompassed by being able to share a park bench with a white man, or to be allowed to enter an all-white theatre. We demand a fundamental transformation whereby, in our country, we shall have the same right of self-determination which free Africa has won for itself, which peoples fighting colonialism have won elsewhere in the world. That right is not negotiable.

It is only when political power has been won by the

## Quotes from speeches over three decades



masses in South Africa that we will be able to begin the immense task of completely dismantling the structures and institutions of apartheid.

## RURAL MASSES, 1985

We have to build a mass democratic movement in the countryside and...solve the actual political problems posed by this population in terms of their organisation and activation.

Bound as we are historically to work for the greatest possible unity of the oppressed masses, and without forgetting that these masses are our reliable base, we have to deal with any personalities within these bantustans who display a democratic consciousness, however limited.

## ALLIANCE WITH SACP, 1981

The relationship between the ANC and the SACP is not an accident of history, nor is it a natural and inevitable development. For, as we can see, similar relationships have not emerged in

the course of liberation struggles in other parts of Africa...

Ours is not a paper alliance, created at conference tables and formalised through the signing of documents and representing only an agreement of leaders. Our alliance is a living organism that has grown out of struggle. We have built it out of our separate and common experiences. It has been nurtured by our endeavours to counter the total offensive mounted by the National Party in particular against all opposition and against the very concept of democracy.

It has been strengthened through resistance to the vicious onslaught against both the ANC and the SACP by the Pretoria regime; it has been fertilised by the blood of countless heroes, many of them unnamed and unsung. It has been reinforced by a common determination to destroy the enemy and by our shared belief in the certainty of victory...

It is often claimed by our detractors that the ANC's association with the SACP means that the ANC is being influenced by the SACP. That is not our experience. Our experience

is that the two influence each other. The ANC is quite capable of influencing, and is liable to be influenced by others.

## ECONOMIC FREEDOM, 1981

The objective of our struggle, as set out in the Freedom Charter, encompasses economic emancipation. It is inconceivable for liberation to have meaning without economic emancipation. It is inconceivable for liberation to have meaning without a return of the wealth of the country to the people as a whole. To allow the existing economic forces to retain their interests intact is to feed the roots of racial supremacy and exploitation, and does not represent even the shadow of liberation. It is therefore a fundamental feature of our strategy that victory must embrace more than formal political democracy; and our drive towards national emancipation must include economic emancipation.

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS, 1985

Our struggle will be less than powerful and our national and social emancipation can never be complete if we continue to treat the women of our country as dependant minors and objects of one form of exploitation or another. Certainly no longer should it be that a woman's place is in the kitchen. In our beleaguered country, the woman's place is in the battle-front of struggle.

## GALLANT YOUTH, 1981

History has imposed an obligation on the youth of today to occupy the forward trenches in the final assault on the bastions of racism, apartheid and colonialism... on the other hand, a people, a country, a movement that does not value its youth does not deserve its future. The youth of our country, especially in recent times, have already won international recognition as dedicated and gallant fighters in the leading ranks of our revolutionary struggle. Their contribution is already manifest in the changed and changing fortunes of apartheid rule within South Africa. They are already playing their part in giving shape to the South Africa of the future.

Messages of condolence have been received from governments of Zimbabwe, Nigeria, UK, US, Sweden, Cuba and Angola, Anglican Church and other religious bodies, British Anti-Apartheid Movement, UN Secretary General, Cosatu, Nactu, former Presidents Kaunda and Nyerere, as well as other governments, organisations and personalities in South Africa and the world over.