

THE ANC ON THE ROAD TO NEGOTIATIONS

The Release of Nelson Mandela

During prime viewing time, on Sunday 11 February 1990, millions of people in South Africa, Great Britain, and throughout the world, sat glued to their TV sets. There they saw the emotional scenes as Nelson Mandela emerged from his last place of confinement: the Victor Verster prison in the Cape. Let there be no doubt about that moment. Mandela impressed his audience. Aged but unbent, calm even in that moment after 27 years of incarceration, he moved from the concealment of a prison to the blaze of world publicity. Perhaps the watchers were even more impressed when this man, for so long maligned by government agents as the enemy of the state, was given a police escort to take him to a public rally in Cape Town where tens of thousands gathered to cheer him on. It was the reception more usually accorded an international statesman - except that there was no local dignitary to greet him: no State President, no cabinet minister, not even a member of parliament as he entered the Grand Parade. This was a state function - but with no guard of honour, no band, no red carpet.

Let us dwell on this release for just a moment more. Veterans of the anti-apartheid lobby roared in acclaim at the greatness of F.W. de Klerk in taking this 'courageous decision' to free Mandela. Those that had shown no sympathy for the anti-apartheid struggle, like Mrs Thatcher, went quite ecstatic and immediately lifted the most important of all sanctions against South Africa: the sanctions against investments and against tourism. Other world leaders did not go so far, but they too cried hosanna for this act of magnanimity. As the praise rang out, it must be asked: what is there to praise?

During the trial of Mandela and his co-accused in 1964 there was always the possibility of the death sentence. In South Africa most of the people sighed with relief when the accused were given life sentences, even though, at that time, such a sentence meant imprisonment till death. After a brief flurry in the media, the prisoners were all but forgotten for the first fifteen years of his incarceration. When, thereafter, there was some agitation for Mandela's release, his co-accused, serving the same life sentence, were usually not even mentioned. There was no excuse then, and none since, for keeping Mandela and his comrades imprisoned for 24 years.

We have no praise for Mr de Klerk, his government and his party. Instead we demand an explanation for the barbarous way in which they keep their political prisoners, for the grave crimes inflicted on prisoners on Robben Island and elsewhere, for the rigour with which they used prison regulations

to deprive their political enemies of the most basic rights accorded to prison inmates.

The political prisoners in South African gaols were not broken by even the harshest regime. They fought injustice and won back some of their rights but their gaolers showed little compassion for their suffering. They were allowed no respite when those nearest to them were ill or died. They were given no concessions when they themselves were ill. Mandela, as is well known, contracted TB in prison and had to be moved to hospital. Must we thank the government for its magnanimity in this case, or should we demand to know who was to blame for the criminal neglect that allowed a man under their control to contract that dread disease? Then, despite President Botha's word that Mandela would not be returned to prison when he recovered, he was moved to a warder's house inside a prison compound, and kept a 'diplomatic' prisoner.

What happened while Mandela was ensconced in that compound house has still to be revealed. We will not probe further now, but the story must be revealed. What was happening to Nelson Mandela, prisoner and yet not prisoner? What manner of convict was he, receiving visitors, visiting President Botha (at Mandela's request apparently), communicating with the external and still banned ANC? Behind all the media hype, there is much that remains unknown. What discussions took place between government administrators and this prisoner? What was prepared and arranged—what deals were struck?

For vast numbers of people in South Africa a spell in prison has been part of their life-experience. Conditions have been notoriously bad and isolation from the outside world almost complete. But this time, it appears to us, the grim walls of South Africa's prisons had the function not so much of keeping Mandela out of contact with society, as of keeping the people of South Africa out of contact with the secret discussions between Mandela and the state.

The Honourable Men?

When Mandela addressed the ecstatic crowd in Cape Town on 11 February he reaffirmed the ANC programme as he understood it: its commitment to the Freedom Charter (including the nationalisation of the mines), to the 'armed struggle' and to the continuation of sanctions against South Africa. These are issues that call for fuller examination, but we will move on for the moment.

Mandela had previously stated his position in a written statement transmitted to President PW Botha in mid-1989 when he called for negotiations to stop 'the civil strife and ruin into which the country is now sliding.' Nelson Mandela had been in prison for 27 years but surely he knew that the 'civil strife and ruin' extended back for decades? Perhaps a man who steps into the public arena after 27 years cannot be called upon to formulate new

programmes. Yet, at least part of his statement was startling and unacceptable. He spoke of President de Klerk as a 'man of integrity.' This man, who was an integral part of the apartheid government, who had condemned those who had gone to Lusaka to meet the leaders of the ANC as traitors to South Africa, was praised as a man who could be trusted. A political operator who maintained the apartheid vision of Dr Verwoerd over decades; who had backed every oppressive step—in the townships and the homelands, in Namibia, Angola and Mozambique, and who reluctantly relaxed some of the apartheid laws because they were no longer sustainable; who insists on minority (that is, white) rights, is a man we must trust! It is no wonder that the youth in the townships of South Africa speak mockingly of 'Comrade de Klerk'.

Where is the evidence of this 'integrity'? To be sure, he had unbanned the ANC, the SACP and other organizations. And it was he, who finally, gave the order for the freeing of Nelson Mandela. He did not remove the laws outlawing communism or even the ANC and the PAC. A wide spectrum of books and oppositional journals, including this magazine, remains banned and their circulation blocked. He did not release all the other political prisoners. Political exiles were not even given the right to return—except at de Klerk's discretion. He even chose to release Mandela, after playing cat and mouse over the final date, to give himself maximum political advantage. Is this integrity?

In case there is any doubt about de Klerk's 'integrity' we add: he could only have taken these tentative steps with the support of his cabinet and with the tacit support of the chiefs of police and the army—the props of the oppressive system in place to this day in South Africa. The regime that has just fought a ruinous war in Angola and still support Renamo in Mozambique; that tried to 'destabilize' all the front line states—from Zimbabwe through to the Seychelles; that dominates the enclaves of Swaziland and Lesotho; that has filled the townships with armed troops and quelled the revolt in Bophutatswana; that still shoots down peaceful demonstrators and maintains its hit squads; that has men and women on death row (even if capital punishment is halted for the moment); this monstrous apparatus has collectively have backed, or appeared to have backed, the moves to end apartheid. What has induced this 'change of heart'?

Did We Get It Wrong?

In the momentous events that have taken place since the middle of 1989 in China and in Europe, in the Americas and Africa, *Searchlight South Africa* has tried to maintain a sense of perspective on what was happening. We greeted the rising wrath of the workers and students of China, of the eastern Europe and elsewhere. But in each case we warned, alongside our colleagues of the journal *Critique*, that these were not moves which would lead directly towards a socialist society. The crimes of Stalinism and Maoism would be

paid for by the retreat of world socialism, the rise of right-wing reaction and the spread of illusions about the market. That was the perspective we had for the immediate future and knew that we would have to wait for a new generation of workers to renew the drive to a democratic socialism.

We believe that we were correct in our estimation of the consequences of the world-wide revulsion in what had taken place in the name of Communism and Marxism. In the light of this retreat of the left we also saw that the crumbling of the Soviet Union as a 'threat' to the West would lead to moves to impose 'stability' in regions of global conflict. That is, to impose settlements which do not run counter to the interests of the USA. It was this that cleared the way for events in south west Africa, leaving a weakened Angola and a vassal state called Namibia.

However, such moves would only succeed where the contending parties were so exhausted or in such financial difficulties that they could be forced to entertain a peace settlement. Provided, that is, that it was in the interest of the US to secure such settlement. In the light of this, the editors of *Searchlight South Africa* erred in not reading all the indicators correctly. We saw correctly that there had been a massive defeat of the revolt in the townships by 1986. We dismissed the effectiveness of commercial sanctions and divestment as a means to end apartheid, but noted that its aim was not to change society but rather to open the way to 'negotiations'. We saw the looming crisis in the South African economy—not because of sanctions but as a result of basic fault-lines in the economic structure of the country. These things we dealt with implicitly or explicitly, but we failed to see the rapidity with which these events, taken together, would put pressure on the South African government and force it to open talks with its erstwhile opponents.

We erred, and it is necessary to say so. However, that has not invalidated our basic premise: that the only way in which the society can be basically transformed is through working class revolution and an appeal to workers in surrounding states to join in building a new commonwealth. Without such action on the part of the workers the society will remain unaltered: the old exploitation will continue, but under new managers.

On the other hand theories, held by proponents of the ANC and the SACP, have been demonstrably falsified by current events. Without examining these in any detail, we can assert that: the belief that capitalists were divided ethnically into English and Afrikaner speaking fractions has been shown by their joint approaches to be patently absurd; the further contention that there is a category 'racial capital' is equally absurd. Capital knows no ethnicity, no race, no skin colour. Capitalism battered on the black working class as long as it was possible, but not because it had a particular liking for the white workers. In the case of the major financial force, the gold mine producers, the privileged position of the white workers, accepted as a political necessity, was always seen as a barrier to increased profitability. The mineowners saw no economic benefit in paying inflated wages to white supervisors and welcome the possible end of apartheid. In this respect the ideologists of the

Chamber of Mines were more correct than their critics who adopted a Marxist guise. It was after all Gavin Relly, chairman of Anglo American, who started the process of negotiations. He was among the first to visit the external leaders of the ANC when such action was considered next to treason, and it was Relly who visited Mandela in prison and came out saying he could do business with that man.

Further: the current proposals to extend common citizenship to all South Africans, whatever the formula for such a move, spells the end of 'internal colonialism', the theory first propounded by the liberal thinker Leo Marquand and hijacked by the eclectic thinkers of the SACP. With the 'homelands' policy about to be scrapped by the South African government; the people of South Africa are recognized as belonging to one society — even if some are more equal than others. With talk of the black communities becoming part of one comprehensive 'free market' system, talk of 'national liberation', must now be seen for what it always was: the concealment of the class nature of the underlying struggle in South Africa

The Road to Negotiations?

Full formal negotiations have not yet begun but only that strange bird, the political ostrich, can bury its head in the sand and say they will not take place. Those that demand that talks take place include: big business and the mineowners; the government and the ANC, the homelands' leaders (whether allied to the ANC or not), the Progressive Party, the Indian Congress and the Coloured Labour Party. That is not all. The leaders of the most powerful capitalist countries and the members of the Commonwealth; the members of the Organisation of African Unity and the leaders of the USSR and of eastern Europe; all want to see the talks begin. Precisely why each one of these parties wants the talks needs discussion, but only those who abstain from all politics can afford to ignore the inevitable.

The convergence of these very different forces indicates that every interested party wants a stable base in southern Africa - each one seeing that stability through its own spectacles, but each desiring it none the less. Without spelling out the complex issues that have influenced the various parties, certain tendencies stand out clearly. The western states want an area that is pacified and open to safe investment. They want an area in which trade can develop and from which dividends can be safely extracted. The Soviet Union wants to withdraw from areas of conflict in which it cannot advance its interests - politically or economically - and which have only been a drain in the past. All want to see a free market economy which will ensure the continued supply of vital minerals to the world economy.

Finance houses, government and opposition, in South Africa have a different agenda that happens to intersect with the needs of the external world. Leaving aside for the moment pressures from abroad, the government

and big business are driven by the need to salvage an economy that is in need of urgent assistance. This, contrary to the propaganda of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, is not the result of sanctions, or of divestment, or even the cutting off of financial capital, serious as the latter might be. Any serious analyst can see that the major source of finance in the country, the production of gold, is slowly running down and must collapse within the next few decades unless there is a dramatic rise in its market price. Between 20–25 per cent of the mines operate at a loss and the average cost of production (when all mines are considered) does not leave a large margin of profit at current prices on the open market. A serious reduction in gold production will place a heavy strain on the government, which receives over half its revenue from the sale of gold. It will also lead to ever greater losses to farmers (already in a parlous state with accumulated debts that far exceed annual returns) who have always been heavily subsidised by taxes imposed on the gold mines.

Only a small proportion of South Africa's land is suitable for agricultural production, and this has been poorly developed by the present land owners. The malaise in agriculture is exacerbated by the inability of farmers to provide adequate food for a population which now stands at 37 million and is expanding rapidly. Attempts at agricultural expansion have been limited by the failure to invest the huge sums of money needed to increase the water supply. The country is notoriously short of water and threatened by a cycle of intense droughts and drowning downpours that leads to the advance of desert and scrub land. Yet constant prevarication has stopped investment in the water resources of Lesotho and few other viable plans have been investigated to prevent large scale tragedies over large regions of the country.

This is alarming enough, and any new arrangement in government will have to cope with problems that could bring the country to the edge of disaster unless there is a massive injection of finance into the country to rescue the farmlands and build new manufacturing plants. This might just become possible if there is a political settlement, if there is capital available from the western powers, and if a political settlement leads to a government that can divert (if not satisfy) mass discontent. Add to this the ceiling placed on local manufacture due to the restricted spending power of the bulk of the local population and the inability of neighbouring states to pay for imports. The state of the economy, which has been allowed to decline by an incompetent government, will reach disaster level unless there is a massive change in policy within the next few years.

Why then should the ANC (or any other movement) aid the government by entering into negotiations? Here too there are complex factors – not least of which are the divisions inside each camp on the advisability of proceeding with the talks. However, whatever the differences inside the ANC, between political and military wings and between the older and the younger generations, that movement has always been one of negotiations. In fact its leaders are proud of their record on that score, always quoting the many messages they sent to Prime Ministers Malan, Verwoerd, Vorster, Botha and so on,

calling for talks and consultations. They have always wanted incorporation into the state rather than radical change. Even the call for sanctions, and the move to armed resistance—half-hearted as it was—was predicated by the hope that this would persuade the government to talk¹.

There is perhaps, an even greater incentive that leads the ANC to a call for talks. Despite its talk of socialism in South Africa the constitutional guidelines drawn up by its leaders in exile, in mid-1988, spoke only of a mixed economy in which the state 'shall have the right to determine the general context in which economic life shall take place'².

Now, after thirty years in the wilderness, the leaders of the ANC want to 'come home' to enter into government, to get their men into the army and to enter the field of finance to which they aspire. However much they fear the insincerity of the government—despite Mandela's stated belief in the integrity of Mr de Klerk—and however much they might fear that they might lose the good-will of their constituents in the townships, they will press ahead with the demand that talks take place.

The Parties to the Talks

The 'talks about talks' of May 1990, in which government representatives confronted part of the opposition, indicate the line up that is being prepared for the next round.

On the government side there were some surprises. These were the men of political power—but without the security chiefs. General Malan, the representative of the army, was not present, although the police were presumably represented by their man in the cabinet. There were no businessmen and a one-time leading Progressive had seemingly turned down an invitation to join this side. There were also no representatives from the Coloured or Indian parties in the tricameral chambers. Even more surprisingly, there were no 'homelands' leaders. In other words, the government showed their contempt for their own satraps or failed to win their support for these initial talks.

On the opposite side of the table sat the ANC/SACP together with representatives of the Mass Democratic Movement. The delegation included Joe Slovo of the SACP, Joe Modise the commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, members of the Mass Democratic Movement, and Beyers Naude of the Christian Council. There were no consultations over the choice of delegates to this meeting, and no statement to explain how it was brought together. Some of these people were to be expected, others were there through the grace the ANC executive, and there were obvious absentees. There appears to have been no attempt to consult with the wider public and there is no information on whether attempts were made to widen the scope of the delegation. Because of this silence it is not possible to speculate on why some groups were excluded, or why some of the delegates were appointed.

However, one thing is clear. The ANC/SACP intends dominating the opposition side of the talks, making the main proposals, and determining what terms are acceptable. They will speak for 'the people', despite the fact that they have no mandate to do so. It also seems clear that the ANC and the SACP (together and separately) will seize the opportunity of mobilising sections of the population on their side. They have already launched membership-campaigns and will use every occasion to impose their control on the trade unions, homelands' councils and community, student and business committees.

The Opposition to Talks

There are of course groups that stand opposed to talks. They need discussion in their own right and also because in some respects they are correct – even if they fail to make their point cogently. However, it must be stressed that there is nothing inherently wrong in negotiations. It is only in the event of a violent overthrow of any regime that talks do not take place. In all other cases: at the end of a strike, or civil struggle, or war, talks are inevitable. Whether there has been defeat or victory all sides have to sit at the bargaining table and talk, although it is quite obvious that the victors will have the means to force through most of their demands. And because the peoples' revolt of 1984–86 did not bring victory, the forces ranged against the government are weaker than they might have been. This too is a reality that must be taken into account.

In the present case those who oppose the talks fall into two opposing camps, and obviously we reject the arguments of the forces on the right. That is: the opposition which includes the Conservative Party and para-military groups such as the Afrikaner Resistance Movement. These groups oppose any relaxation of the apartheid system and demand the reversal of those reforms already introduced. This is the voice of farmers and white workers, of the petty bureaucrats, a majority of white police and an unknown number in the armed forces. Let there be no doubt, that even though these forces fly in the face of world opinion, even right wing world opinion, and are therefore without a viable future, they are capable of inflicting heavy damage inside the country. Vigilante forces as seen in Welkom, hit-squads emerging from the present police force and/or army, and even crazed opponents of change can spread mayhem before they are overcome. If not curtailed and defeated, these provide the base for a police or army coup.

Most black opposition to the talks has a different base and perspectives. It stems from the fear that too little will be won from talks with the minority government and that those who enter such talks will compromise on basic issues. This opposition, which is fractured and atomized at present, include the PAC and the Black Consciousness Movement and a host of smaller groups that includes part or all of Azapo, the Unity Movement, the Cape Action League (now transformed into the Workers' Organization of South

Africa) and so on. Their reasons might differ, but they have all spoken out against conducting talks with the government. Whether they will all maintain this stance over the coming months remains to be seen, but thus far they oppose the talks. We can see some reason in their claim that without victory won on the battlefields, or in the factories and the townships, they cannot possibly enter into talks. The problem is that they have not provided any cogent set of alternatives and no answer to the fact that talks are going ahead, despite their opposition.

Talks and the Democratic Process

We can close our eyes to reality and seal our lips against talks, but that would be merely opting out of a real situation in which decisions will be taken that will affect all our lives. If there is to be any radical or socialist input, new tactics must be framed to meet the situation. In making our proposals we do not wish to do more than open up discussion on what might be achievable.

First it seems to us that when talks are opened there are four conditions that should be resolutely demanded:

- a) Delegates to such talks must be drawn from all parties, all organizations and all trade unions. The ANC has no mandate to speak for the disenfranchised, and no one has nominated them to act on behalf of all.
- b) All talks that take place must be located in South Africa. Talks outside the country's borders will not be subject to scrutiny and are not acceptable.
- c) All sessions must be open. Secret talks must be opposed. There must be no secret bargains, no signing away of any democratic rights, and no fudging on basic issues.
- d) At the conclusion of all talks, their results must be submitted to the public for approval.

Quite obviously, any group that stands opposed to talks will have no opportunity of making such demands. This might satisfy their political egos but it will exclude them from any say in what happens.

We do not stop at this point. Even if the above four points were accepted there is no guarantee that our basic requirements would be satisfied. We could always be told that what was agreed was, under the circumstances, the best that could be obtained. The people's needs are so great that only continuous pressure can secure them. In saying this we turn back to a previous century, when democratic demands were being discussed in Europe, to demonstrate our meaning.

In March 1850, in their 'Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League,' Marx and Engels said that the 'revolutionary worker's party' co-operated with the petty-bourgeois democrats against the [ruling] party

which they aim to overthrow, but 'opposes them wherever they wish to secure their own position.' They continued:

The democratic petty bourgeoisie [in our case, the ANC] far from wanting to transform the whole of society in the interests of the revolutionary proletarians, only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible.

Marx and Engels then set out the demands of the petty-bourgeoisie in Germany in 1848, pointing out that 'as far as the workers are concerned one thing, above all, is definite: they are to remain wage labourers as before.' The demands of the petty-bourgeoisie, however, could not satisfy the party of the proletariat:

While the democratic petty bourgeoisie want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible, achieving at most the aims already mentioned, it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat have conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far—not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world—that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to improve the existing society but to found a new one.

The address must be read as a whole for its revolutionary content. The authors called for 'an independent organization of the workers' party' that would oppose all attempts at limiting the worker's demands. It was a call on the workers' to 'drive the proposals of democrats to their logical extreme,' to go beyond the claims of the petty-bourgeoisie and lay the foundation for themselves to assume power. The authors concluding message to the workers are as relevant now as they were in 1850:

*Their battle cry must be: The Permanent Revolution*³.

To find the means through which the workers' voice can be manifest in the coming period, one step seems obvious to us: an elected assembly is needed to monitor the progress of these talks. Ideally such a body should be called into being through an election, but that might prove impossible in the short time that is available. The alternative, second best as it would be, is for local organizations, in the townships and the factories, in the towns and the rural areas, to nominate delegates to a Constituent Body able to control those who engage in talks. The workers must set up their own section in such a body to

advance their claims and create the conditions in which their voice will become the predominant voice in the shaping of a new society. They might not be ready to transform the country now, but only through such endeavour will they secure some of their demands. Only in this way will they prepare for whatever further battles are required to secure a socialist South Africa.

References

1. In October 1987 the ANC national executive stated that it 'reaffirmed that the ANC and the masses of our people as a whole are ready and willing to enter into genuine negotiations provided they are aimed at the transformation of our country into a united and non-racial democracy.'
2. A senior official of the ANC quoted by Tom Lodge (*South African Review*, No. 5, Hans Zell, 1990, p.50) stated in 1986, when the organization believed that the apartheid state was about to be overthrown, that 'for some while after apartheid falls there will undoubtedly be a mixed economy, implying a role for levels of non-monopoly private enterprise represented not only by the small racially oppressed black business sector but also by (white) managers and business people of good will.'
3. Karl Marx (1973), *The Revolutions of 1848*, Penguin, pp.319-30.

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