

THE SPLIT IN THE ANC, 1958.

James Fairbairn

James Fairbairn (Jack Halpern) filed a number of reports in the period 1957-60, covering political events in South Africa in a number of journals including the *New Statesman*, *Reynolds News*, *Africa South* and *Contact*. These included the rural revolts in Zeerust and Sekhukuneland, the Treason Trial, issuing of passes to African women, and so on. On 23 February 1958 he was one of the two white reporters who attended at least part of a special Transvaal Congress [ANC] Conference at which the possibility of a split loomed large, leading to the formation of the Pan-Africanist Congress.

James Fairbairn's Cable

The crisis within the Transvaal African National Congress will reach a new intensity this Sunday March 9, when a Provincial Conference, called by the Africanist/Petitioners dissidents is due to meet in Lady Selborne, Pretoria. This step follows the chaotic ending two weeks ago of an 'official' special Provincial conference, forced upon the Transvaal executive by the National executive, to answer charges of misadministration.

Having failed to obtain satisfaction after a day of shameless procrastination and inspired confusion for which both sides were to blame, a section of the dissidents seized the Province's official car after assaulting its driver. Next day they raided the Provincial offices and seized furniture and records. Two days after the conference the Provincial President, treason suspect Elias Moretsele, resigned, stating that 'there can be little or no doubt that [after last Sunday's conference] the present Provincial executive does not enjoy the confidence of the majority of the active membership of the ANC in this province'.

Emergency sessions of both the National and Transvaal Provincial executives have been in progress during the whole of last week, and it has been agreed that the National body is to intervene, though not how and when.

Thus only one week before the much heralded National conference, the organization upon which it depends both for its successful staging and for the implementation of its resolutions stands divided. What lies behind the present smoke screen of accusation and counter-accusation?

Although blurred at present, there were initially two lines of division: organizational and political.

The critics of the Transvaal administration, known since last September as the Petitioners, claim that Congress up here has fallen into the hands of 'machine' politicians whose primary aim is to stay in power. To achieve this, claim the Petitioners, the leadership has seen to it that only caucus-rigged elections have taken place since 1953. When leaders who were in power were named, banned or arrested on treason charges, replacements were appointed from above and, at last October's annual Provincial conference in Pretoria, a reelection of the Executive **en bloc** was pushed through as a demonstration of 'faith in our leaders'.

This, linked with what appeared to be an unsatisfactory report, led to the drawing up of a petition which called upon the Executive to resign because, in the signatories own words: 'Item 1) We submit that the conference was not fully representative; 2) The Northern, Eastern and Western Transvaal was not notified; 3) We are not satisfied with the financial statement submitted at conference; 4) We submit that the conference was not procedural; 5) We submit

that the elections at this conference were in violation of clause 6 of the constitution; 7) We submit that the speaker was biased.'

Submitting that 'it is high time the ANC is properly and democratically run', the petitioners called for a special conference within twenty-one days, i.e., by the end of November. They were led by men like Segali and Jerry Mbuli.

On 23 February the Transvaal Executive admitted that this petition had been signed by the secretaries of ANC branches at Sophiatown, Orlando East, Meadowlands, Western Native Township, Alexandra, Evaton, Roodepoort, Lady Selborne (Pretoria), Kwa-Thema, Atteridgeville (Pretoria), Mofolo and Botsabelo. In addition the secretaries of branches at Eastwood (Pretoria), Rustenburg, Mabieskraal and Newclare No 2 claimed to have signed. The executive either denies that they received these additional petitions or claims that there is no properly constituted branch in some of these places. This question of branch constitution is not a new one — there are some ninety official branches in the Transvaal and at least twenty are not as yet recognized.

The executive ignored the petition completely.

The petition was, of course, only the end result of long-standing dissatisfaction. In finding this way of ventilating their apparently legitimate grievances, the petitioners had made common cause with that group of ideological dissidents known as the 'Africanists', who today dominate their joint faction.

As Africanist has become something of a swear word and bogey of late, this group bears closer examination.

African nationalism is no new thing in the Congress movement, having been directly endorsed by the national conference of 1949. This conference, which decided on a boycott of all government bodies for Africans, also adopted 'the creed of African nationalism as a basis of the fight for National Liberation.' This nationalism has its roots in the Congress Youth League which was formed in 1944. In its declaration of basic policy, which is today a rare document,¹ the Youth League differentiated between two kinds of nationalism, the extreme kind which would drive the white man into the sea and leave Africa for the Africans, and the moderate kind which believes that only Africans can win freedom for themselves but acknowledges that the other racial groups are here to stay. This latter kind, under which the Africans would dominate by force of numbers, was the kind espoused by the Youth League.

It is worth remembering that many of the present leaders of Congress, committed now to a 'responsible' multi-racial line, were leading members of the League and vehemently espoused its ideology. Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo — as well as Petlako Laballo, the present Africanist chief theoretician — were foundation members of the League. Its leading founder, Dr Peter Tsele, remained an Africanist to his death.²

The original theme has now been embroidered, and was expressed to me recently by a leading Africanist as follows:

Even if we grant the sincerity of the Whites, Indians and Coloureds who want to collaborate with us, the fact remains that the only way in which white domination will ever be broken is by black force. Protests, petitions, conferences, press publicity — all these, however excellent, have availed us nothing in the past and will certainly avail us still less in the future. Blood will have to flow in the streets before we are free — and, when that day comes, [if] we have to stop and ask ourselves whether a particular white man was a friend of ours in the past, we will never be able to act. To bring freedom we need hate in the hearts of the Africans — after it is all over we will grant all those who accept African hegemony their full rights as private citizens of an African state.

That is the theory. How much of it would change should the very evident desire for office be gratified I cannot tell. For both reasons, however, the Africanists today resent the very real influence which the Congress of Democrats and also the Indian National Congress wield in the ANC. For the same reasons they reject the **Freedom Charter**, which they regard as a foreign document, and the multi-racial commitments which the present leadership have made.

And here they link up with the Petitioners, who hold COD largely responsible for the continued retrenchment of the Transvaal leadership. The Africanists were only too happy to take over wholesale the criticisms made by the Petitioners who, in turn, began to absorb Africanist ideas. Thus Segale, the highly emotional leading figure amongst the Petitioners, has been known to come out with virulent anti-white slogans. He is a huge excitable man whose feelings of frustration often seem to affect both his oratory and his reasoning of calmer moments. To this day he refuses to carry a pass, and has served several terms of Bethal farm labour — one for assaulting a policeman.

On the requisition committee in which the Africanists and petitioners have fused, Segale is outstripped as a public figure only by [Josias] Madzunya, the bearded 'fire eater' of Alexandra. Dressed invariably in a heavy black overcoat, Madzunya is a fiery spell-binder who took a leading part in the Alexandra bus boycott. More recently he struck the only jarring note at the multi-racial conference when he warned that it was 'stoking up the fire in a boiler which had no safety valve'. Leballo, who is also on the requisition committee, is an ex-school principal who was dismissed for his five participations in the Defiance Campaign, for which he spent eleven months in jail. The other members of the committee are the two Malapo brothers, M Mlonzi, S Mahopo and Jerry Mbuli, the last named prominent in the Youth League but not an Africanist as yet. But the **eminence gris** of the committee would seem to be Peter Molotsi, a light coloured, medium sized man with a particularly vindictive verbal delivery. Refused a hearing by the Transvaal executive, this group organized so effectively that a split was expected by the National Executive at last December's national conference in Orlando. An attempt to call a truce for the duration of the conference was unsuccessful and it was only through the astute intervention of Port Elizabeth's Govan Mbeki that disaster was averted. More — Mbeki seemed to have found a way to heal the split proving his rapidly growing reputation as one of Congress's most capable leaders. His tactics were simple: he satisfied the petitioners by getting the National Executive to guarantee that if the Transvaal executive did not call a special conference within twenty-one days it would be arranged at National level. Then, having isolated the Africanist element, he allowed a full ideological debate in which rank and file participation led to an overwhelming defeat of Africanism — only five Africanists were on their feet at the end.

The crisis seemed over. Open ideological discussion had succeeded where vendetta, boycott and even expulsion had failed, and the charges of maladministration were to be answered at last.

In the event, the twenty-one days stretched to more than sixty-one, but last month it became clear that the National leadership had decided that their Transvaal colleagues were expendable in the interests of unity before the Workers Conference and the white election.³ **Liberation**, the leadership's journal of the Congresses, devoted almost the whole of its February issue to the crisis in Congress. Admitting that last year's **en bloc** Transvaal elections had been a mistake, the journal pointed out to the Transvaal executive that the noble thing to do was to resign, standing for reelection as individuals if they wished. **Fighting Talk**,⁴ took up the theme with a two-voiced discussion of Africanism which, after dragging some very obvious — though not red — herrings across the pages, marked some of the Africanists as 'loyal leaders of the future'.

The heat was clearly on and, just before the special conference, the National Executive 'persuaded' the Transvaal leadership that, after rebutting the Petitioner's charges as best they could, they should resign and call for elections.

That undertaking was, however not kept. The conference, held once more in Orlando, got off to a bloody start just after nine o'clock. The dissidents were antagonized even further when they learned that 'volunteers' to keep order were being recruited only from 'loyal' branches. Although instructions had gone out shortly before the conference that only official delegates were to be admitted, a large crowd of ordinary members turned up at the hall. Many of them were from the Africanist branches of Alexandra, Sophiatown and Orlando East, and there can be little doubt that the Africanists intended to pack out the conference, a tactic which Madzunya has employed before. Several heads were bloodied before these 'observers' forced their way into the hall and, even in the presence of Chief Luthuli as guest of honour, chaos reigned for some time.

The pattern was now set for the whole conference. Luthuli's deputy, who was in the chair as a neutral from Natal, allowed the arrangement of seating of delegates and intruding observers to drag on till lunchtime and the subsequent squabbles over delegate's credentials to proceed until five in the afternoon. He seemed to make no effort to control the proceedings but, on the other hand, the requisition committee's followers seemed to be so poorly led that they often added to the confusion and delay.

Delegates grew increasingly incensed by the blatant stalling to which the platform resorted. At one stage Madzunya tried to get onto the platform, and a brief scuffle ensued. This provided a pretext for the temporary disappearance of the signed petitions, and it was well after five when Jerry Mbuli finally made the Petitioners' case, on the financial irregularity charge, on behalf of the requisition committee. A personal intervention by National Secretary Oliver Tambo, who suggested that the executive might concede some of the points raised and concentrate on the ones still relevant now that the special conference had been called, was rejected by Mthembu, acting Transvaal president. Mthembu, in addition, challenged the accuracy of Mbuli's figures and began, as dusk was falling, to read a long and rather irrelevant statement. The Requisitioners called for immediate elections, and were largely cheered by the majority of the delegates.

Shortly after this, chairman Nyembe announced that they had to vacate the hall and closed the meeting with the singing of 'Nkosi Sikelele Afrika (God Save Africa) — which was ignored by perhaps three quarters of those present. Last week's sequels to this chaotic ending have already been related.

There can be no doubt that Segali's raids have lessened sympathy for his group, but the majority of delegates must have returned to their branches thoroughly fed up with the Transvaal executive. How many of them respond to the call for another conference this weekend (March 9) remains to be seen — travelling to conferences from outlying corners of the Transvaal is a tiring and expensive business.

In a special interview for *Contact*, Petlako Leballo told me that this conference will elect a new executive with a view to taking over the leadership of the national Congress. And when he succeeds, he and his group will call for a strike a few days before the white elections. 'We want the Nats back in power', he told me, 'and such a strike will scare the white voters into putting them back. With another Nat government the day of reckoning will be brought rapidly nearer. We Africanist leaders are not afraid of going to jail and do not worry about legalisms like many of the present Congress leaders — if we, the people will carry on with action'.⁵

But will the African people follow men like Leballo? I do not think so — at present. The National leadership of Congress is firmly wedded to multi-racial endeavour, and the overwhelming defeat of the Africanists at the last national conference convinced me that the

rank-and-file back the leadership. But if the national leadership appears to endorse an unwanted and discredited executive in the Transvaal, then the Africanists will be given an ideal chance of power. 'It has been decided that the National Executive is to intervene', national secretary Oliver Tambo told me last weekend, 'But we haven't yet decided how or when it is to [do] so'. The National Workers' Conference and the white elections are almost here.

Footnotes

1. The Programme of Action (or at least the version generally accepted) can be found in Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (eds) (1973), *From Protest to Challenge*, Hoover Institute Press, Vol 2, pp 337-39. When Halpern wrote this account there was no general history of the ANC or its Youth League. To this day many aspects of the history are still untold. There is a dispute over the date of founding, with some claims that the foundation was in 1943. The accepted leader at the time was Anton Lembede (not Peter Tsele as stated below).
2. Killed in a car crash before the commencement of the anti-pass campaign.
3. A conference called to implement the suggestion of the South African Congress of Trade Union's call for a one pound a day campaign. The sponsorship of this conference was never clearly stated and eventually the entire campaign was converted into a stay-at-home to persuade the white electorate to remove the National Party from office. This was held by the Africanists as a further reason for breaking with the ANC.
4. Originally the journal of the (white) Springbok Legion, the journal became a Congress paper, expressing the views of the whites in Congress, most of whom were in the Communist Party.
5. Ironically, it was the ANC that called for a stay-at-home to 'influence' the election — but in their case to secure the defeat of the National Party. If anything, it helped secure the return of the government and this led to some criticism of the tactic among Congress members.

The account printed above is a copy of the cable sent to **Contact**. I was shown Halpern's notes on the February conference and had a copy which I subsequently destroyed. These notes are also included in his surviving papers. Although I had strong disagreements with the Africanists, I thought that a split at that time in the ANC would lead to a further weakening of the forces opposed to the government. Being a member of the Transvaal executive of the Congress of Democrats I took the report to its next meeting and moved that steps be taken by the COD representative on the Joint Congress Council to prevent the impending split. My attempts were blocked, first by claims that there was no report, then by claiming that the report could not be authenticated, and then by the chairperson arbitrarily ending the meeting. My intervention might have come to nought no matter what steps were taken, but it was the callousness with which it was dismissed that provided insight into the way the COD, and its Stalinist mentors, operated. — BH.