

THE NATIONAL UNION OF SOUTH AFRICAN
STUDENTS

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OFFICIAL OPENING

Address

by

DR. ALAN PATON

NUSAS Presidential Address

by

Vice-President John Daniel

department of press relations

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Chairman, Dr. Phillips, Members of NUSAS, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I regret that your President is not able to be here this evening, and I, and I am sure your other honorary officers, would like to be associated with a message of greeting and an expression of solidarity from this Congress, which I now declare to be open. I read yesterday that the Minister has written to Mr. Robertson saying that he is satisfied that your President was engaged in activities which furthered or were calculated to further the achievements of some of the objects of Communism, but that the Minister cannot disclose his information without detriment to public policy.

I should like to make two observations about this. Some of the objects of Communism would be the same as some of the objects of any Government concerned for the welfare of its people, for example, the aims to make provision for every person according to his needs. Therefore the way in which the law is framed is thoroughly bad, and gives the Minister a latitude of interpretation which is indefensible, and it is of course because that latitude is indefensible that the Courts are prevented from passing judgment as to whether the Minister was justified or not in the action he had taken. It is a fine situation, is it not, when the law of the land is used to silence the courts of the land?

You will note that the Minister is also of opinion that to disclose the information on which he acted against Mr. Robertson would be detrimental to public policy. This statement leaves many of us profoundly sceptical. Surely it would be in the public interest to disclose this information. For one thing, this information, if it were of any substance would do much to lessen the profound public suspicion that Mr. Robertson was banned purely and simply because NUSAS angered the Government by inviting Senator Kennedy to visit South Africa. No reasonable person, and certainly no member of a university, should believe anything simply because some other person says that he believes it. We are therefore entitled to be sceptical about the Minister's alleged information, and I use the word "alleged" advisedly, because the Minister's statement can be no more than an allegation, and will remain such until it is proved in a court of law.

Therefore the grounds on which your Union protested were absolutely the right grounds to choose. You asked that Mr. Robertson be released or charged, and that is the essence of the issue. Many of you, no doubt the overwhelming majority of you, did not believe that Mr. Robertson was engaged in any subversive activities, but you did not make that the primary ground of protest. You struck a blow for the rule of law, for the civilised concept that the freedom of citizens may not be restricted except by a court of law, where the case for the prosecution and the case for the defence have been properly heard. By doing so you heartened tens of thousands of people. It is a matter for extreme regret that some prominent University personalities did not take the same unequivocal line. They were not required to find Mr. Robertson guilty or not guilty. They were certainly not required to comment on his academic career. They were merely required to state that no person should be punished except by a court of law.

I am proud to be an honorary Vice President of NUSAS, and I am proud of the way you conducted your protest. But most of all I am proud of the way you showed your grasp of those things that are fundamental to the life of any civilized society, at a time, I regret to say, when many older people are beginning to forget them, or, should I say, when many older people are beginning to be afraid to remember them?

There is one matter in which you should be forewarned. It may not be in the so-called public interest to disclose information about Mr. Robertson's banning now, but it may prove to be in the public interest later, perhaps during the coming session of Parliament. You must be prepared for this. You must be prepared to hear from members of the Government innuendos of a smearing kind, that Mr. Robertson did this, and he did that, but no proof will be advanced that what he did was in any way criminal. You must recognise these innuendos for what they are, and you must refuse to give any fragment of credence to innuendos that have no accompaniment of proof. I knew a person accused of conspiring to murder, and had certain dealings with him, and had fully braced myself to hear my name mentioned at his trial. This did not happen, because the Attorney General ruled that evidence of our relationship would have been irrelevant. Had this evidence been led, it would not have implicated me in the murder, but it would have connected me with the murder trial, and such is the lamentable state of our country that some people would have thought of me, not as connected with a murder trial, but as connected with a murder.

Consider the following cross-examination :-

Prosecutor - You left the house at 9.0 p.m. ?

Witness - Yes.

Prosecutor - And you have heard that the theft was discovered at 10.0 p.m. ?

Witness - Yes.

Prosecutor - So that you went to the house at 9.0 p.m., and after you had gone, it was found that the money had gone too.

Witness - I did not steal the money.

Prosecutor - I am not saying that you stole the money. I am simply establishing that after you had gone from the house, it was found that the money was gone too.

It is precisely this kind of innuendo that you must be prepared for, and you must not only recognise it, you must say that you recognise it for what it is. You all know the proverb, where there is smoke there must be fire. It is time this proverb was revised for South African use and went something like this - where there is smoke, look out for the you know who.

I now come to a second topic that is intimately connected with the first, and that is the visit of Senator Kennedy. It has been likened to a fresh wind blowing from the wider world, and I cannot think of a better simile. And it reminds me of that brilliant parable of Reginald Reynolds who compared South Africa with a room full of people with all the doors and windows closed, and all the people smoking and drinking and talking. And a stranger from outside opens the door, and exclaims, "Phew ! What a fug in here." And they shout out at him, "How do you know ? You've only just come in."

Mr. Con Botha, in speaking of Senator Kennedy's speeches, showed a pride in things South African which pleased me immensely. For he said, in perhaps not quite these words, "Senator Kennedy uttered a number of cliches, which I have heard Alan Paton, Helen

Suzman, and our own Chief Luthuli, utter much better." It would have pleased me even more if Mr. Botha had said, "Our own Alan Paton, our own Helen Suzman, and our own Chief Luthuli." But I must admit he didn't say that. And I could say to Mr. Botha, "Look, Mr. Botha, if you don't like our own South African cliché-makers, why don't you go and live in some other country?" You know what these clichés are, do you not? That man, individual man, is the touchstone of value, and that all society, all groups, all organisations, even the State itself, exist for his benefit. That Government, even by the consent of the governed, must be limited in its power to act against the people. That there may be no restriction on the freedom of men to seek education or work or opportunity of any kind.

You are being told today, incessantly, persuasively, by the S.A.B.C. and the Information Service and by a host of others, that these things are outmoded, or are liberalistic, or communistic or humanistic, but we have the backing of our State President, who stated here in Durban that unity does not mean conformity, and that there is a place and a need for individuality in any community.

One must agree with Mr. Botha that these things have been said before by our own local boys and girls, or as they say in America, by our native sons. But what an encouragement it was to hear them said by a new voice, and not only a new voice but a powerful voice, and by a powerful voice that might one day be one of the most powerful voices in the world. Many of us, who in this country are embattled and beleaguered and punished without trial and banned without reason, suddenly felt that we were part of a wider and freer world. Why do you think thousands of people, especially young people, clamoured to hear Kennedy, and stretched out their hands to touch him, and waited hours to hear him? Wasn't it because they were hungry and thirsty, and Kennedy came like rain to a parched land? Didn't they want some reassurance that the things in which they believed, and which some of them were growing afraid to believe, were believed elsewhere too, by other students, other peoples, other countries of the world? I am sure that this is so.

It is said that Senator Kennedy really came to South Africa to advance his own political career. I suppose that any politician would do that, especially if he could get the kind of welcome that Kennedy got here. Even our own big politicians would visit other countries to advance their political careers. Let's see where they could go. They could go there ... and they could go there ... and they could go there ... well, let's get on with the speech.

I tell you tonight that NUSAS may expect another onslaught this year, and I am not referring to the onslaught which may be made on you by the Minister of Justice, but to the ideological onslaught which will be made on you, not by the Afrikaans Studentebond and the S.A.B.C. and the Information Department, but by teachers and students at the universities where you are strongest. The pattern of this onslaught is clear and I shall tell you precisely what it is. A determined effort is going to be made to persuade you that you are a kind of museum piece, that you hold to clichés and doctrines which modern South Africa rejects (and modern South Africa in this context means the South African electorate). In fact you are not with it. By sticking to what you at present believe in, you are withdrawing from the area of dialogue, you are withdrawing from the dynamic centres in which the issues are really being determined. You are failing to understand that the dialogue is not whether there is to be separate development or not, the dialogue concerns only what kind of separate development there is to be.

I hope NUSAS will never accept such a proposition. It makes certain assumptions which should be totally unacceptable to any student. It assumes that the nature and extent of dialogue is to be determined by voters and politicians. The political philosophy of these gentlemen who want to bring NUSAS to its senses can be summed up in a few words - "let's be with it, boys, because otherwise we'll be without it." I must admit to you at once that it's more pleasant to be with it than without it. I have my weak moments when I wish I was more with it. I have my better moments when I know that there's something more important than being with it or being without it, and that is being true to the things one believes in. I tell myself that if I were more with it, I wouldn't be having the honour of opening your Congress tonight, and that if I have to choose between being with it, and being with you, I'd choose to be with you. Keep up your courage, NUSAS, so that others can keep up theirs.

These people who want NUSAS to come to its senses live in an eddy on the edge of a great river. In this eddy, they go round and round, and get the feeling that they are going places. They want others to join them there too, so that they too can feel this microscopic dynamism. They resent those who won't join. When a young man like Ian Robertson sticks up his head out of the eddy and cries out, "Boys, there's big river out there", they slap him down, just as they slapped down Galileo when he taught that the earth wasn't the centre of the universe. History seldom remembers the ones who do the slapping down, except in small print and with disdain; but it always remembers those who stuck their heads out of the eddy and saw the big river.

Some people want NUSAS, and I use this phrase with reluctance, "to improve its image". I say to you, improve your image as much as you like, but don't improve it to satisfy people who would destroy you tomorrow if they could. Any change in NUSAS must come from NUSAS itself. Some people want NUSAS to have a constitution like that of the United States, so that certain principles can be enshrined and entrenched. I don't think that we should compare ourselves with the United States. These principles and values live in you, and if they die out in you, which I do not believe can happen, no constitution will save them. And the way to keep principles and values alive is to proclaim them and implement them, articulately and courageously as you have always done.

I read that Mr. Blaar Coetzee has declared that NUSAS cannot find inspiration in its own country, but must look to America. I think it is a perfectly permissible taste - not to be punished by banning or detention - to prefer the inspiration of Senator Kennedy to that of Mr. Blaar Coetzee. Pay no attention to those who declare that you are un-South African. "I, personally, prefer not to say much about the 'duty' of the Press, since it is not easy to determine to whom or to what the Press owes a duty.

"Has it a duty to the State - that is to say, to the government of the day, the Public Service, the Railways, the Department of Information, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, and all the rest of the bodies that are directly or indirectly controlled by the political party in power ?

"Has it a duty to this particular complex that transcends its duty to the community in general ?

"Has it a 'duty to the country' - I put that phrase in quotes because here again we have a shibboleth that is often used for ulterior purposes ? And, if so, what comprises the country ? The veld, the mountains, the rivers, the trees, the flowers, the fauna ?

"Is it to these that the Press owes a duty ? Or is it not rather to the people who inhabit the country - the poor as well as the rich, the under-privileged as well as the privileged, the Blacks, the Browns and the Yellows as well as the Whites ?" (H. Flather, OPTIMA)

How can you put it better than that ? That's where your duty lies, to the students of this country, to the maintenance of the freedoms and responsibilities of our universities, to the people of South Africa, the poor as well as the rich, the under-privileged as well as the privileged, the Blacks, the Browns, the Yellows and the Whites. May you ever continue to perform this duty as well and faithfully as you have performed it in the past.

ALAN PATON

MR. JOHN DANIEL, NUSAS VICE-PRESIDENT

Mr. Chairman, Dr. Paton, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On November 27th 1963 President Johnson opened an address to the joint session of Congress with these words: "All I have I would have given gladly not to be standing here today". Without wishing to be in any way pretentious, I can say that these words echo my feelings tonight, and further I am sure that if I could, I would bring to all of you at this Congress the good wishes of the President of NUSAS, and again if I could, his sincere regret at not being able to deliver his Presidential address, as we all know he should be.

For 65 days now, Ian Robertson has been restricted without charge or reason. During this period, the country has witnessed the strongest outburst of anger for some years at the actions of this government. And though today we may not be protesting physically, we have not forgotten or forgiven the Minister of Justice for his act. In our souls, the fires of indignation burn as fiercely as did the torches held in protest all over the country a few months ago. Our cry has always been "charge or release", and so it remains today. Until Mr. Robertson is charged and convicted, we will regard him as the victim of vicious tyranny, suffering because he was the head of an organisation which was to be host to a democrat from the United States --

The protests failed to shake Mr. Vorster from his cocoon of silence, but, as we were told to do, we are waiting for Parliament to convene, where we expect the Minister to reveal the real reasons for his action. We hope the Minister will not hide behind the Suppression of Communism Act, or make references as did the Afrikaans press, to the theory, unfounded though it is, that immediately prior to his banning, Mr. Robertson made a trip around the country during which he was supposed to have been organising demonstrations to coincide with Senator Kennedy's visit, demonstrations which would have been given wide coverage overseas. He then indeed would be clutching at straws.

Mr. Chairman, it has almost become traditional for the NUSAS President in this address to say that the last twelve months have been the most difficult for the National Union. I am breaking this tradition, for I do not believe that these past twelve months have been the most difficult for the organisation. But I would say that the last six weeks have been the most critical period in its existence, and that this period of crisis is likely to continue indefinitely. The reason for this is that, by banning the Nusas President, the Government has shown that it does not wish to regard us merely as students, but now regards us as some kind of threat to the State security. We can no longer expect immunity from the actions of the government merely because we are students and a students' organisation. We are now an organisation regarded by many as a danger to the State, but at the same time, let us remember that we are one admired and respected by many other South Africans; we are an organisation which will be closely watched, not only by the international student world who will be seeing whether we have the courage of our convictions, but also by the security forces of this country. This situation is likely to prevail until the present climate changes in this country.

In other ways, however, these past twelve months have been successful ones for the National Union, and the task of NUSAS officials has, ironic though it may seem, been made easier by powerful people in authority in this land. The past year has seen an expansion of our ranks, with the affiliation of three new centres: the strong and determined branch at Pretoria University, a branch denied its democratic

right to operate on the campus by the SRC of that University; an equally determined branch at the new University of Port Elizabeth; and recently we have welcomed the Johannesburg Correspondence College branch into our ranks.

We saw the Non-European Section of the University of Natal leave NUSAS for a period of 6 weeks last year, but we were glad to announce their re-affiliation in September, and they have since continued to play a constructive role within the organisation. In May, the Department of Indian Affairs suspended the constitution of the SRC at the Transvaal College of Education for Asiatics and banned Nusas from the campus. The students courageously reacted by announcing that no candidates would stand for the new SRC unless a clause was included in the constitution allowing the SRC to affiliate to NUSAS.

During the year, another chapter has been added to the long and sorry history of abortive attempts at co-operation between the English and Afrikaans universities, Nusas and the ASB. I refer to the very recent deliberate and tragic wrecking, by the ASB of the debate between the ASB President and Nusas Vice-President.

In June, after many months of uncertainty and planning, Senator Kennedy visited South Africa at the invitation of NUSAS. From the moment the visit was announced, it became increasingly clear that this was likely to prove NUSAS' most significant single undertaking. The ramifications of the Student Assembly's unanimous decision of last year have been stupendous. On the domestic front alone, who could have seen then that the next Student Assembly would meet in the wake of his visit; that it should have been the immediate cause of the banning of the President and thus indirectly of the vast outpouring of indignation and solidarity on NUSAS campuses; and that although still beleaguered and under threat, the Assembly would meet this July with unprecedented support from its campuses and the absolute conviction of the respect and regard of its friends here and abroad.

However, let us remember that Senator Kennedy did not change Nusas. Our stand on academic and human freedom, and our other principles, were the same before he came to this country. But his visit has strengthened our resolution to maintain this stand and our beliefs.

Thus we can look back on a year of vigorous activity, and now it is a time for reflection: a time to reflect on the crisis situation in NUSAS which I mentioned earlier, and to remind ourselves that we are essentially a students' organisation; to remember that where others are categorising people according to discriminatory criteria, our basic principle is and must always be, that a student is simply a student.

It is time again to reassess our role as a National Union of Students; to continue to act as a students' welfare organisation with our many trade union functions; to continue to provide a platform for contact and dialogue across the barriers artificially created by our rulers, a forum for debate and discussion on a basis of equality. An organisation where students may receive something which is, sadly enough, almost unique in South Africa today, but at the same time something fundamental to the healthy development of a South African nation, namely practical experience in non-racialism.

However, in the present circumstances, I believe that this National Union has to fulfil a far greater responsibility, that is to maintain our belief in democracy in a country which

is rapidly losing faith in democratic procedures. We are essentially concerned with the student situation in South Africa, but we must cling to the right to concern ourselves with, and comment upon, all aspects of the South African society. The opinions of the students of today must reflect the manner in which we would like this country to be run in the future, and if we want South Africa to be a non-racial democracy based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, then we must strive to maintain the spirit of democracy on our campuses. This role will necessitate NUSAS' continuing to act as a vehicle of protests against injustice, a source of encouragement in the defence of fundamental freedoms and democracy. This is our greatest responsibility. For if this country is to be saved from itself, then it must be the democratic mind which runs this country in the future, and not the mentality which regards folk-singing as subversive, smoking as taboo for women, and which gleefully applauds the Minister on the banning of a fellow-student.

This is the path which NUSAS must follow in the future, difficult though it is to know what the future holds for NUSAS, except to say that it will be hard and dangerous. Perhaps legislation will outlaw multi-racial organisations, or perhaps the Minister of Justice will pick off the leaders of this Union with successive banning orders. So as we look to the future, I want to say that NUSAS need not be ashamed of its precarious position. We have taken a stand, and we know that it is a democratic and honest stand. We know that in a democracy, we would not be in a situation fraught with personal danger, but we also know that this is no democracy, and that history has cast for us a different role. Let us not abdicate from this responsibility: let us always remember that there are powerful people, and people amongst us, to whom the principles of NUSAS are anathema and who seek to destroy the organisation. Let this, however, only be a sobering thought, but never let it shake our determination. Let us take courage from what Senator Kennedy said in his Day of Affirmation address :

"Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, these ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of repression and resistance."

And finally as I call for a Congress of unity, I end with the words of one who was in my position a few days ago -

"To oppose may be fraught with danger; to yield can lead only to a grave aggravation of the many problems which already exist. To hesitate in speaking clearly and acting firmly, is to hasten our own demise; to recognise the problem with all its ramifications and to act accordingly, is the only course open to us. Let us have trepidation for the future without being intimidated. Let us have resolution without desperation. Let our high purpose so stand out from the needs of men in these dark South African days, that when posterity judges us, as it will, then men shall say this generation was the golden link in the chain of the ages, stretching out over the centuries, past and to come, in this great country."

John Daniel.