

PRESIDENT'S OPENING ADDRESS TO THE 56TH NUSAS CONGRESS - AURET VAN HEERDEN.

Two years ago, to the day, yesterday, nine Cape Town students were banned, along with some 20 other people, most of them representatives of the Labour Movement. Three years before that, 16 people - 8 representatives of SASO and 8 of NUSAS were banned. In between was the trial of the 5 NUSAS leaders, under the Suppression of Communism Act, lasting a year. We've had detentions, bannings and the exile of numerous others. And yesterday, Laura Levetan, Vice-President of U.C.T. SRC, was served with a t-year banning order, two years to the day after her predecessors. She joined the ranks of men and women such as Paul Pretorius, Saths Cooper, Debbie Budlender and Graeme Bloch, to mention just a few; people whose searching and critical activities have made the state fearful of its security. For in South Africa men and women aren't required to think, and critical activity cuts very quickly to the bone ... people are required rather to reap the benefits of racial privilege; not to step outside the bounds of that system. It is important to realise that these young people have made their sacrifice not in isolation, nor in vain, but in the name of liberation. Not because it makes their sacrifice any greater, but because it sets it in perspective. It allows us to see that they are not isolated or peculiar examples; that repression of this order has become a way of life for black South Africans, and one which is barely noticed in white society, but which black people in this land are committed to ending. It also allows one to see that such repression has become not only a thread of S.A. society, but the very cloth from which it is cut. Remember these people then, not as martyrs, nor as fools, but as leaders, black and white, young and old, from whom we can draw hope and inspiration. It is people of their character who have formed the spearhead of the student movement over the years, and their contribution must never be forgotten.

I can only pay tribute to the NUSAS leaders who have gone before me ; to the people who have had to lay down their privileges, and the sacrifices they have had to make to the movement. I can only assure them, that the things for which they stood, will never be forsaken.

Now, over the past few years, we have seen many developments in student activity. We've seen the rise of people subjected to Afrikaner nationalism, subjected to CNE. We've seen people coming into the universities from 2 years in the Army, from a devastatingly effective media system - control system - hinging around things like the SABC, the Publications Directorate etc. And these people pose ever greater problems for the student movement. The difficulties of conscientizing these students - of having them come to certain fundamental conclusions about South African society, facing up to the basic realities of life in this country - have increased rapidly over the past few years. And it is in response to these increased difficulties, to these overt limitations on student activity, that NUSAS has changed and developed new strategies, new tactics, new platforms. Charles has mentioned the sorts of developments which have taken place, many of them in response to limitations imposed by the state. Things like the Riotous Assemblies Act, the van Wyk de Vries Commission, the Schlebusch commission, have all imposed new limitations on our effectiveness and our activity. But we have responded with new tactics, and hopefully, with renewed vigour and effectiveness.

But it is pertinent to stop at this stage and consider some of the other growths or manifestations on the campuses in the past few years. Particularly the growth of right-wing student movements; the so-called political associations, who appear, with very very small numbers, and very limited support, to exercise

a great deal of influence, and certainly, generate a great deal of activity on the campuses. Associations, whose English-language pro-government nature instantly raises certain questions, certain doubts. We have seen in recent months the revelations about other pro-government, English language organizations, about where their funds have come from, about the sorts of backers and mentors that they do have. I estimate that in 1976, right-wing political associations spent about R25 000 in their anti-NUSAS activities. Again Charles touched on their referenda campaigns, their quotation of the Schiebush-Commission report, the way in which they manipulated these incidents to attach NUSAS at every turn, to present obstructionist and negative criticisms of NUSAS whenever they could. And I think that what must be stressed, and what must be asked, is that when NUSAS was curtailed from receiving money from overseas, NUSAS was declared an affected organization, so that outside influences could not exercise any hold over students, these people did not stand up, in fact these people supported the claims, and at this stage we are now in a position to turn the tables on them. We can demand to know where their funds come from, who their backers are - demand to know who their exceptionally wealthy and exceptionally generous backers are, who are so insistent on wielding an influence on white student politics.

But let us proceed and consider what this congress means to us, and what lies ahead. This is the largest congress NUSAS has ever had. It represents probably twice as many people, twice as many delegates, as any congress before us. But we must not let the euphoria of numbers lull us, must not let it numb us; for it is not in numbers that NUSAS's role and NUSAS's effectiveness lies, but in the content of our programmes, in the extent to which we can actually reach students, and have them accept and face up to realities in S.A., and on the basis of that to recommit, or rededicate their skills to some meaningful future in this country. And it is essential that at this congress we do not rest on our laurels, we do not allow the success of the past year, the victories which have spurred us all on, to actually exercise an inertia on our deliberations or on our activities.

It is essential that we continue to contribute to the political awareness of white students; and indeed to unmask the nature of S.A. society itself. Students need direction and leadership if they are to break out of the molds the establishment would have them fill; if they are to come to terms with the realities of the South African situation. Without this contextual understanding, students will find it impossible to devise meaningful roles for themselves. Already we see in some students a frightening degree of complacency and apathy, and it is to that which we must immediately address ourselves.

Besides the difficulties that NUSAS faces in the consciousness of many of its constituents, there is a further challenge which the organization must meet: And this is the challenge of its relevance. In a climate like South Africa's, the degree of repression and intimidation, can very easily make the politics of survival an ethic in themselves. To concern ourselves solely with the survival of the National Union would be an unjustifiable compromise. As an end in itself, the organization would represent nothing but gross opportunism - it would represent self-aggrandisement in its worst form. We have to be very clear as to whether or not we are actually advancing the goals or the causes for which we stand, or whether we are simply engaging in a process of meaningless compromise or sham radicalism. There are two guarantees against this which form one process. The first is a rigorous understanding of the relationship of means towards ends. The student movement represents a limited but important sphere of activity; and one which is not likely to bring about fundamental change, or represent the vanguard of political change. At the same time it is one which has resources and opportunities which can be utilized in a complementary fashion. This involves a clear conception of what our role can and should be, the resources we have, our relationship

to other groups and to our constituents. With these strategies in mind, we can provide students with leadership, direction and meaningful activity, remembering that the areas which are open for us to contest are not only the state of the struggle, but the sight of the struggle. Without these strategies, we will do little more than play games, to the detriment of both ourselves and the student movement. I've seen generations of involved students give up, drift into cynicism; I've seen them drift into the libraries to adopt a position no better than that of armchair critics. And it is unjustifiable to allow us to perpetuate those same failings that have often surfaced in previous student activities. We've got to guard against those trends, against the trends of cynicism, of joining the establishment, of futility. We have to make sure that our strategies are such that they are appropriate to the situation we find ourselves in, and capable of providing leadership within that situation. And in order to do that, we have to develop a particularly clear conception of what our role can be. The clarity surrounding our programmes must be such that people are able to situate themselves within the South African conjuncture, able to establish exactly ... (speaker off mike, tape side ends) ... but forgetting about ravines, hills, gorges, rivers, whatever, which he must go over, around and under. And so it is essentially a tactical and strategic approach to our campuses which is required if we are to succeed. There is a question of communication which has to be faced up to very squarely by students, a question which involves making our ideas accessible; ensuring that they do not circulate in the narrow confines of the SRC offices, that they do not circulate only in the heady confines of social science degrees, that they in fact escape from those limitations, begin to percolate down to the various other levels of student politics and student government in general. We must make sure that our ideas are accessible and that involves a high degree of self-restraint, a high degree of discipline. If we are serious about getting through, we are going to have to accept the discipline of working on a white campus. It poses a lot of problems, it poses a very very stormy ride. And if we are to be effective in the slightest, we have to accept that it is going to be one which involves a lot of sacrifice and a lot of restraint.

We have seen in the past NUSAS crippled by what has been seen by its constituents as a clique, or closed nature; as a non-democratic, or non-participative air. We cannot allow that to creep into this Congress, we cannot allow that to creep into our activities during the year. We must ensure that participative democracy, not merely for the sake of our constitutional validity, but for the sake of our very progress.

NUSAS has been subjected to many attacks over the years, particularly from the right-wing, but also, less frequently, from the left-wing, and it is in terms of those sorts of criticisms, and those sorts of attacks, that democracy and participation become vital. If we are to have criticism, and I believe we must if we are to avoid the dangers of dogmatism and blindness - then that criticism must be of a particular kind, if it is to be constructive. It must be in the form of self-examination, of a re-evaluation constantly of our activities, of who we are aiming at and what our success rate is. And if it takes that form, then it can facilitate planning of our activities, our analysis of ourselves, our conception of ourselves. And it is criticism of that sort, which facilitates analysis and planning, which I see as constructive criticism. Hopefully, the organization will continue to demonstrate a sufficiently democratic and participative structure, to make that possible. In this way, we can learn from experiences, like those which have arisen from the Referendum in Pietermaritzburg - where the Women's Movement have levelled a particular allegation of sexism, or of token acknowledgement, in support of sexist practices. I must say publicly that I apologise to the Women's Movement for the breach of those principles, for the insincerity to feminist principles which that action demonstrates; but at the same time to reaffirm that NUSAS is sincere and committed to those principles, and that

with constructive criticism we will learn from those mistakes, or go forward stronger.

Our years at university are extremely fortunate ones - the years in which we have the opportunity to exercise our society, to formulate analyses, to arrive at conclusions on the basis of a valid historical analysis of our situation. And on those conclusions, on those analyses, we can base our activities. And our activities even then are privileged ones - they are accorded far more safety, far more leniency than the activities of black people in this country, or the activities of groups struggling for fundamental change. But we must not let that isolation, that faintly privileged position, allow us to delude ourselves, as to our effectiveness, as to our relevance.

I said earlier that there are two guarantees against us falling into the trap of opportunism. The one is that we constantly re-evaluate our strategies, our activities. The other is that we maintain a democratic and participative organization. There is a further one, a further guarantee against opportunism, against dogmatism, against blindness - and that is throughout our years at university, throughout our years of activity in student government, we constantly bear in mind the sacrifices which other people in this country are making daily; the sorts of limitations and constraints they live under and the sorts of things that they are striving for; and ensure that our activities become not merely a narrow form of self-aggrandisement, but a form of exploiting certain complementary and auxiliary resources which we have, in the dedication to that same struggle, and to those same goals. If it is to those sorts of commitment - the commitment demonstrated by people like Sechaba Montsitsi, who is now on trial with 11 other members of his SSRC compatriots, commitment like that of Deliza Mgi, who has just been banned after 395 days in detention - if we commit ourselves to sacrifices and commitment of that sort, I believe we can go forward in very very difficult times, heads high and with a valid and relevant strategy.