

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO THE 53RD CONGRESS

It has become traditional for successive Presidents to stand before Congress and proclaim: "This is going to be a critical meeting in the life of the National Union."

I am not going to break with that tradition.

This is indeed going to be a critical Congress and one that is going to extend us to the full; one that is going to demand of us a patience and an insight that we are seldom called upon to exercise.

We meet here at a Congress centrally concerned with a thorough reassessment of our Union. Over the past year, a year which started quietly enough, we have been hit with successive crises. Each of these crises was sufficient to break this organisation yet we weathered them and have emerged to the point we are at now.

We had the Breytenbach trial and the months of detention for many of the people associated with the National Union which preceded it. This trial threw us unprepared into hectic activity. I deal with this fully in my report and won't cover it here.

We had strongly motivated and organised challenges to the National Union emerging on most campuses. Durban disaffiliated and SRC's were elected at UCT and Rhodes with members who were openly hostile to or at least highly critical of the National Union. There will definitely be referenda on three affiliated campuses in 1976 following moves initiated last year.

The organisation has, however, held together and it has held together well. This is not a crisis Congress, though it is critical. We meet together now in a spirit of careful reassessment of the role and functioning of the National Union. This spirit is appropriate to the demands of our particular time. And we meet in the confused and volatile milieu of Southern Africa 1976. The Angolan civil war drags on. Notice has been given of further repressive legislation in Parliament. The first step of carving the country into puppet states takes place later this year with the "Independence" of the Transkei.

As again we reforge the National Union into a structure most adequately suited to the concrete implementation of the ideals and objectives expressed at the beginning of our Constitution, we are faced with three major underlying issues.

1. IMPROVEMENT OF DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURE

The first of these issues has dominated the life of the National Union over the past few months. It is the concern to develop the most adequate democratic structure for the National Union.

Criticism of the National Union emerged at different centres in the second half of last year. Attention has focused on the Constitution

our attention to formalising effective guidelines for that task.

This does not necessarily mean that we are constructing an essentially conservative and top-heavy bureaucracy.

Rather, we are searching to improve a structure and ensure that the overwhelming majority of students regard with confidence as the legitimate and fair context within which a political struggle over the formulation of policy and use of resources takes place.

I believe we will achieve the formula that will guarantee that confidence

2. DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The second crucial issue facing us is the need to include a heterogeneous student body within the boundaries of the National Union. We are committed to the full inclusion of the student body in the decision-making of the National Union through adequate structures.

Likewise, we must diversify the activities of the National Union to give substance and content to our democratic structure. Democratic decision-making does not exist in some linguistic Constitutional void. It is ultimately related to the activities which we undertake.

It is inadequate to simply formulate a Constitution that best theoretically safeguards the rights of our members. It is necessary to develop an ethos and a practice of inclusivity forged upon a basic consensus about the principles and objectives contained in the beginning of our Constitution.

The National Union has no desire whatsoever to break from its commitment to these principles and objectives. I believe they are firmly held by the overwhelming majority of our members.

However, difficulties emerge when it comes to practical concrete implementation of these principles. We must give careful thought, therefore, to developing opportunities for activity which encompasses people with diverse viewpoints.

Again, this is not something new to the National Union.

Throughout our history we have been faced with a central dilemma, a dilemma which emerges in the open from time to time and which we must confront now. On the one hand it is crucial to our organisation, by its very nature, that we cater for the needs and interests of our members as they articulate them.

The parameters of acceptability, the boundaries of our organisation must be defined in such a way as to include and generate the whole-hearted support of the majority of our members.

and on our decision-making process. After careful study and discussion a draft proposal on the Constitution has emerged as a basis for Congress's deliberations.

A number of the questions central to the National Union deserve mention now.

Firstly, the National Union is a confederation of SRC's. This is crucial to our perception of it. The central component of this structure is representivity based upon elections at campus and the participation of these elected representatives is the formulation of the policy and programmes of the National Union. This needs to be borne fully in mind in considering changes to the Constitution.

A strong word of caution needs to be added here. In its most recent issue, "To the Point" implied that the changes to the Constitution in some sense indicated the findings of the Schlebusch and Van Wyk de Vries Commissions. These findings claimed that NUSAS is an undemocratic organisation cynically manipulated by some hard-core of radicals for their personal political ends.

As we said at the time, this charge is false and must be most emphatically denied. Likewise, we are not concerned at this Congress to change an appalling situation into a marginally better one. The situation is far from appalling - NUSAS is and always has been a democratic organisation, its officers democratically elected, its programmes and policies democratically formulated. SRC's have always participated fully in the life of the National Union.

So let us be clear about this. The issue before us is to improve a basically good structure and to formalise and entrench principles already implicitly or explicitly contained in the Constitution, principles which have been practised in the past.

The very fact of our meeting now in the spirit of co-operation in reassessment gives lie to the claim in "To the Point" and other claims like it.

As the National Union grows it is big enough to change to be appropriate to the particular time. This change is not the result of the lies and propaganda contained in the Reports of those two Commissions.

So, the National Union is concerned to improve the structure of its decision-making based upon clarifying the central importance of elected student representatives.

As elected representatives we are accorded the authority to formulate policy and administer resources in ways which the majority find acceptable without dominating the articulated interests of minorities.

The diversity of viewpoints on campus, the heterogeneity of the student body makes this a difficult but not impossible task and we must turn

On the other hand, for us to fulfil our objectives to which we are committed, adequately, and which are clearly stated in our Constitution we must necessarily define a clear and articulate policy and set of programmes.

Now, as at no time in the past few years, we are compelled to face this tension squarely. The future of the National Union will depend on how adequately we do this.

We can no more include the whole range of possibilities in our self-definition than we can define ourselves in such a way as to exclude significant opinion amongst our members. Essentially, this means we cannot expect our members to be unequivocally committed to a single body of theory, whatever that theory may be.

However, we can expect and we must expect unanimity on specific issues of concern to us. We cannot avoid a number of critical issues facing us as young South Africans.

The responsibility for discovering the balance in this tension between inclusion of diversity and clear direction rests with us now. The buck stops there. We can neither abrogate our role as representatives nor as leaders.

Confronting this recurrent conflict between responsible and clear-sighted leadership and maintaining full contact with our constituency and the full confidence of our membership is unavoidable. If we do so adequately, we are sure of placing the National Union on firm ground for many years.

This tension reminds for some strange reason of a comment someone made about President Lyndon B. Johnson. He said he's the kind of man who, when he sees you drowning 20 yards from shore throws you a 15 yard rope and says he met you more than half way.

That's got nothing to do with the issue but I had to include it somewhere.

3. DIRECTION

I have said we need to forge a clear direction and that we cannot avoid facing problems crucial to our existence in South Africa.

We must be democratic and we must include diverse viewpoints within the context of a basic and firmly held consensus. But this does not happen in a void, it happens for a reason and this is that we have the dual role of service to both the student community and to society as a whole. This is central to us; without it we might as well not exist.

As much as we are student representatives we are student leaders and as such we must confront the critical challenges which face South African youth and particularly South African student youth. We are compelled to take stances which facilitate the growth and development of our

members, which give them the opportunity of acting for the best interests of all South Africans, which contribute to the establishment of a human society in this country.

Today the Prime Minister gave notice of another piece of legislation designed to attack and attempt to destroy the widespread and deeply held opposition to the policy of apartheid. This in itself is not surprising. What does surprise me is that other people might be surprised. He appears to have successfully duped people by his carefully protected image. But it is only an image and one which distorts the ugly truth about this man and his Government. The Act is not surprising; it again underscores the fact that this society is based upon the systematic and cynical repression of the legitimate political opposition to such a system.

This can never be far from our attention in the National Union. If it becomes so, let us close shop tonight and put our heads back in the sand.

Over the past few months we have learnt about South Africa's involvement in the civil war in Angola. For many years we have heard the South African Government self-righteously proclaiming a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of another country. Yet in October the South African army moves deep into Angola and joins a tragic civil war. What hypocrisy is this? I believe South Africa's involvement is ill-advised and illegitimate.

I believe that we must face this issue squarely in the course of the coming week. Our members might be called to fight in another of these ventures. Our members might be killed fighting this Government's wars for it in Africa. You know of this new Bill giving power to the Minister to conscript soldiers to active duty deep in Africa.

Later this year the Transkei is to be granted its "independence". The policy of carving up this country, of balkanising and separating its people into easily controlled and exploited units has reached a critical point and I believe we are compelled to take a firm, intelligent and informed stand in the issue.

This country should be ruled by the people, for the people, in a single unitary state.

These are but two of the issues which face us. There is South Africa's continued occupation of South West Africa and their exclusion and repression of SWAPO, the largest political force inside the territory. There is the closing of the Medical School for blacks in Durban.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy to the National Union and its members was the withdrawal of SASO in the late '60's and early '70's. This effectively cut us off from the voice of the majority of South Africans. Now, we must listen very carefully whenever we can hear it.

If we fail to do this our perception of ourselves and our environment will be seriously lacking. Consequently, I believe that every effort should be made to increase contact, particularly at the level of practical co-operation, with black groups. In this we will have to take the lead from them, but our willingness to enter into co-operation

must be unambiguously stated and our commitment to a free South Africa for all its people actively pursued.

After all, our future lies in the progress of the struggle of the black majority and in our response, as whites, to their legitimate demands. Surely, there is nothing more crucial to us as white students than the future of our country.

So, Mr. Chairman, we must confront issues and problems head on and develop a method of dealing with these issues that maximises our impact and relevance. We must confront the issues in the most fully democratic way possible, and we must develop activities which enjoy the widespread support of our members and cater for their diverse needs, interests and skills.

This, then, is the three-fold problem around which this Congress hinges - to fuse together our democratic structure, inclusive activity and a forceful enunciation of our democratic principles into a working unity. It is certainly an extremely difficult task and one which is felt more acutely than at any time in our recent history.

But I believe Mr. Chairman, that we are equal to the task. I am confident that the National Union will emerge from the Congress unified, powerful and dynamic.

I wish us well.