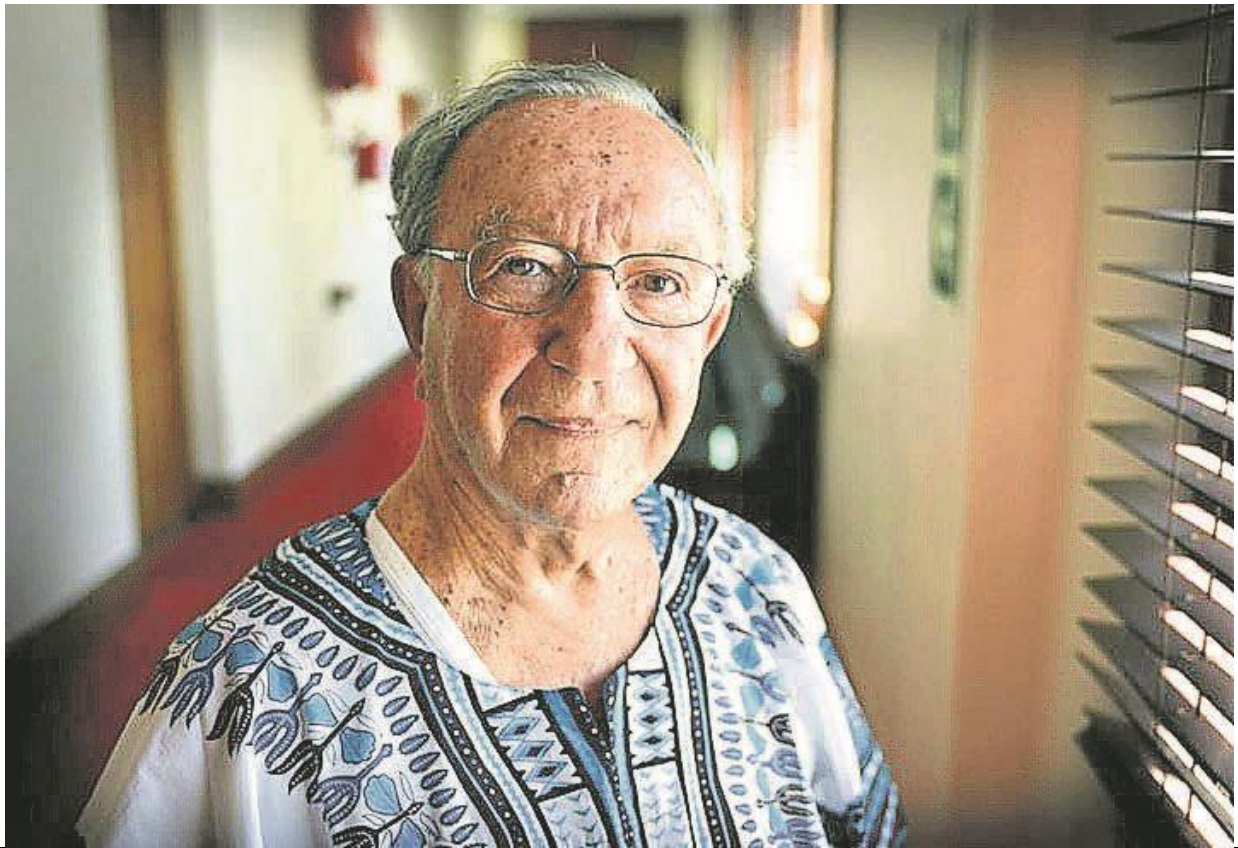


City Press

Tribute to Ben Turok – the brightest star of our movement

Yonela Diko 2019-12-15 14:30



Professor Ben Turok. Picture: Facebook

In his life of struggle, he survived a two-year treason trial, three years in prison and house arrest, until he escaped to join his cadres abroad

Most of us fondly remember Isithwalandwe/seaparankwe, the erudite ANC veteran Ben Turok and his generation as standard bearers of all that is best about our organisation: principled, selfless and servants of our people above reproach.

These are the comrades who made the ANC the conscience of the nation and they are the rightful heirs to a weighty legacy, a legacy born out of struggle, the reinvention of an entire

legislative state, the establishment of the government of the people, even when the country was facing one of the greatest evils of the 20th century.

Turok and his generation demanded of themselves the highest level of discipline, the highest levels of learning, of sacrifice and they did not ask from a comrade anything they had not asked of themselves.

ONE OF THE CORE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF THE ANC, EMBODIED ALMOST DIVINELY IN COMRADE TUROK, WAS THE “BATHO PELE” PRINCIPLE, “PEOPLE FIRST”.

Yonela Diko

Even before joining the ANC, as a young man, Turok was already a trailblazer who had distinguished himself as the champion of the downtrodden.

When he organised a meeting in London in the 1960s for those who wanted to see a radical change in South Africa, he caught the attention of Oliver Tambo who seemed to have already followed his work and would fully endorse it with an attendance with his wife, Adelaide.

In the ANC, with Tambo at the helm, Turok would find his rightful place and a home through which he would pursue his lifelong aspirations with the highest calibre of comrades who held similar convictions and determination.

One of the core values and principles of the ANC, embodied almost divinely in comrade Turok, was the “Batho Pele” principle, “people first”.

Comrade Turok understood that the ANC, the government it was privileged to lead, its alliance partners and all its visions and plans, had at their core the people.

Turok appreciated that even if the ANC, in all its glory and splendour, ever turned against the people, if it ever looked inward and allowed its driving force to be the preservation of itself and its leaders, against the interests of the people, even this glorious movement could not be allowed to become the enemy of the people.

It would have to be opposed, with great vigour and determination.

TUROK WOULD ALWAYS BE ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY, WHATEVER THE COST, WHATEVER THE SACRIFICE.

Yonela Diko

Turok's political DNA, the conviction of his heart, the bricks that built his moral code, would be found in the statement of the future, drafted by all South Africans more than half a century ago, a statement that would be known as the Freedom Charter.

This was a statement of the people, a statement to live by, a statement to die by and many did pay the highest price for it.

Turok was there and he made his contribution and his mark in history for all posterity.

He would not, 50 years later, now with the power to make that statement a reality, be part of its betrayal.

Turok would always be on the right side of history, whatever the cost, whatever the sacrifice.

Early on in his life of struggle, he would survive a two-year treason trial, a three-year prison sentence and house arrest until he was able to escape and leave the country to join the league of other extraordinary South Africans who pressed the pressure button on the apartheid state from outside the borders until it had no choice but to yield.

As with many in his generation, the struggle for freedom had to be fought with one eye on the inevitable future, with a clear need for freedom fighters to prepare themselves for freedom and government.

Turok would then, on top of being absorbed daily by the struggle to liberate our people, immerse himself in both academic and self-study, obtaining critical and multiple degrees in preparation for the rebuilding of the country that would surely come and writing 20 books which mainly focused on the rebuilding of a just state.

It's important, however, to distinguish between Turok's singular fight against moral decay in the ANC and the use of state apparatuses for nefarious reasons and what he ideologically stood for.

ALTHOUGH DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSED TO THE JACOB ZUMA VERSION OF RADICAL ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AND ITS WICKED INTENTIONS, TUROK BELIEVED IN A RADICAL APPROACH TO GOVERNING SOUTH AFRICA

Yonela Diko

Turok lamented the conservative approach to pursuing transformation and economic growth and was annoyed by invoking rating agencies and investors as the determinants of how much we could push for change.

Unemployment of our people, the millions who lived in squalor and abject poverty, inequality, and insane wealth for a few, gave him sleepless nights as a freedom fighter; he was not ready

to see freedom of our people rendered meaningless by the brutal nature of harsh socioeconomic conditions.

Turok did not believe that what was holding back our economy was lack of skills, the cost of doing business, government red tape and such neoliberal tropes.

Turok believed that we had all the skill and manpower we needed in the country but the government was not doing enough to pursue expansionary economic policies that were developmental and inclusive.

He did not believe our government needed to render itself to the mercy of the markets which, in all likelihood, did not care about the poor or our constitutional responsibility to rigorously address the injustices of the past.

Although diametrically opposed to the Jacob Zuma version of radical economic transformation and its wicked intentions, Turok believed in a radical approach to governing South Africa, for we did not have the luxury of time, fiddling and tweaking, while our people slept without food, without hope, and this greatly pained him.

Turok wanted schools to open until evening, he wanted adults to then join school after work, he wanted an aggressive approach to education which would effectively turn the country into one big centre of learning, training and teaching.

COMRADE TUROK WAS HAPPY WITH HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE LIBERATION OF OUR PEOPLE, TO THE FREEDOM CHARTER, THE CONSTITUTION AND MANY OTHER CRITICAL DOCUMENTS OF THE ANC OVER THE YEARS

Yonela Diko

As with most ANC comrades, Turok's primary baptism was in Marxism.

Seeing black bodies being mutilated and killed in neighbouring Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) for profit by white farmers, the indifference and callousness with which a human life was treated by owners of capital all the more entrenched his resolve to fight the capitalist class which enabled apartheid to thrive economically.

That explains why Turok was hellbent on the inclusion of socioeconomic rights of the people in the Constitution, which was not given priority even in the ANC's constitutional guidelines of 1988.

Even when they were finally included, he was not happy with how these rights were included in the Constitution, which put the burden of their provision on the government within the government's limited resources.

This was not enough he felt and opened room for many of these rights not to be fulfilled.

In the end, despite these reservations, comrade Turok was happy with his contribution to the liberation of our people, to the Freedom Charter, the Constitution and many other critical documents of the ANC over the years.

After his retirement from Parliament, he was not done yet and went on to provide a platform for many others, including myself, to make our views known under his great publication, The Thinker Magazine.

He was always available to advise, guide and help those who would ask.

For us it helped that he was a member of our ANC branch, the Gaby Shapiro Branch in Rondebosch, Cape Town.

Our reputation as the super branch is owed much to him.

We will miss him dearly, but he lives through his extensive work.

Hamba Kahle, Mkhonto!

Reference:

Diko, Y. (2019). [Tribute to Ben Turok – the brightest star of our movement](https://city-press.news24.com/Voices/tribute-to-ben-turok-the-brightest-star-of-our-movement-20191215), from *City Press*, 15 December 2019. Available at <https://city-press.news24.com/Voices/tribute-to-ben-turok-the-brightest-star-of-our-movement-20191215> online. Accessed on 2019-12-15