

“We Fight Ideas with Ideas.”

**YOUTH AND THE
BUILDING OF THE
NATION.**

BY

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OPENING ADDRESS TO THE FIRST CONFERENCE OF
THE
SOCIETY OF YOUNG AFRICA
HELD ON THE 20TH DECEMBER 1951

This, the First Conference of the Society of Young Africa, is in my opinion, no ordinary conference. It is a historical landmark in the arduous road that the Non Europeans must travel in order to achieve liberation.

In the past I have attended many conferences, some of them inconsequential, some of them accompanied with a great flourish of enthusiasm but yielding no permanent fruits. One remembers the day when the separate racial groups of the Non Europeans held their exclusive conferences to which delegates came as to a social gathering when they had the opportunity to display their varied social accomplishments. At this stage, the masses, if they came at all, served merely as a background to supply the plaudits. One remembers yet another stage when the white liberals occupied the stage of honour in the conferences of the Non Europeans, where, if it was an African conference, the chief item for discussion was the “Native problem”, or if it was a conference of the Coloured people, the main topic was the “Coloured problem”. In other words, during this period the Non Europeans saw themselves as constituting a “problem” in the land of their birth – a problem to be solved.

Yet another stage, as the grip of oppression increased with the imposition of one law after another, the people became more discontented. But they did not know which way to turn. They did not come together, they still remained in their separate racial pens and failed to realise the source of their own strength. All this, because their minds were still dominated by the spirit and outlook of the liberals. The result was that their conferences resolved

themselves into a futile recital of grievances. This was the time when they still thought that they could educate the oppressors as to the evil of his ways and appeal for a change of heart. There are still a few of the old ones amongst us who belong to this stage of political adolescence.

Then came a stage beginning about the end of the Second World War when there was a striking change of attitude. A maturing process had been taking place and registered itself for the first time on a national scale in 1943, when the All African Convention issued a call to the people, a call to unity not only of the African people but of all the Non European oppressed. This was the first crack in the walls of the racial pens.

In June 1943, the Statement from the All-African Convention (A.A.C.) declared:-

“There is a clamour for unity...There is a great desire amongst all sections of the Non Europeans to forge a weapon not only for political defence but for attack. There is a determination not only to defend ourselves but to launch a struggle for full democratic rights....The present-day conditions demand such unity. It is not a thing that comes from the air. The desire for unity comes from the realisation that our physical differences, our colour differences, our cultural differences have nothing to do with our economic position. There is one fundamental factor common to us all and that is our oppression.”

This was the first sign of revolt against their political tutelage under the liberals.

The December Conference of the A.A.C. in 1943 was one of those conferences which marked a turning point in our history. It had far-reaching consequences, laying down as it did the basis of future development. Following immediately upon it, the Preliminary Unity Conference was held in Bloemfontein and there was formulated the Ten Point Programme that was to provide the principled basis of all our struggles. In that same year, the Coloured people were gathering their organisations

together for a concerted fight and leading them towards the unity of all the oppressed. From that time on, the Non Europeans saw themselves as men and women able to represent themselves in Parliament. They were no longer satisfied with palliatives, a little reform here and a patching up of the system there. They demanded full democratic rights.

The important thing here is the change of the attitude of the mind. There is a throwing off of the old slavish habit of the mind. At every conference the people now exercised a new-found independence of thought; they were able to formulate their tasks clearly, state their position and evolve methods that are required for an effective struggle. This in turn laid the basis for yet another development, which found expression in the last Conference of the Non European Unity Movement early this year – the Birth of a Nation.

The Birth of a Nation.

This conception directs the population along new channels of thought. It signalises the beginning of political maturity. No longer do the Non-Europeans see themselves as a “problem to be solved”. On the contrary, it is they who have to solve the problem of South Africa. With full consciousness of political manhood and the responsibilities that go with it - responsibilities that devolve upon them – they examine the situation in South Africa and find – a Herrenvolk problem. They find the leadership of the state is in the hands of a section that is suffering from a mortal sickness, A Herrenvolk mentality that is in danger of dragging the whole of society into an abyss. They see themselves as faced with the task of Building a Nation, a healthy, virile nation.

This is the stage which the Non-Europeans have reached in their political development. This is the atmosphere in which the new body, the Society of Young Africa, is being formed. The young Soyans belong to the present. They are rooted, not in the past but in the present. Their whole thought-process is rooted in the ideas of today; their attitude and approach to problems are moulded by the intellectual atmosphere in which they live and move. I see the birth of a new Youth, born out of the pressure of the times. In the

formation of SOYA which bodies forth the consciousness of the new Youth, I foresee the shape of things to come. It was in this sense that I said earlier that this is no ordinary conference.

Like everything else that is born, the Society of Young Africa must grow, and it will grow if it adjusts itself to its environment, growing with the struggle and in turn contributing to it. By growth I do not mean merely an increase in their numbers. That is taken for granted. I refer rather to progress in the realm of ideas. The SOYAN youth must integrate themselves with the movement for liberation, draw sustenance from it, expand their intellectual horizon and in turn make their contribution to the movement. This is a challenge to S.O.Y.A. if it takes its tasks seriously. A new epoch is opening up before the youth. Just as the formation of the All-African Convention pronounced the death-knell of the outlook of tribalism (remember, the very designation "African" as used by the Convention, precludes tribalism), and opened up a period in which the Non-Europeans worked together as oppressed nationalities, so now the idea of Building a Nation, originating from the N.E.U.M., *opens up a new perspective*. It is here that the Society of Young Africa finds its place. Along this road SOYA will fight for and defend those ideas that assist in the building of the South African nation, which will include all men and women, irrespective of colour or creed, who contribute towards the well being of the nation and whose home is South Africa. In this connection SOYA can, for instance, assist in bringing to the consciousness of wider sections of the people the two-fold nature of oppression; national oppression and class exploitation. It is generally recognised that Non-Europeans are oppressed as nationalities and most people see the struggle simply as between the oppressed Non-Europeans and the White oppressor. It is not so commonly recognised that there is another and more fundamental form of oppression, namely, class exploitation. When we consider this last, we find that in the final analysis the conflict is not basically that of colour. This circumstance determines the method of organising our forces for the struggle.

We do not ask to know a man's physiological pedigree. We leave that to cattle breeders. Such a question is part and parcel of a

Herrenvolk mentality. The only question the SOYANS ask is: What are your political convictions? Do you believe in unqualified equality, political, economic and social? In other words, do you believe in the Ten Point Programme? These are the only relevant questions. And our test is: Whether or not a man applies non-collaboration. Questions of colour, race, sex or creed do not enter.

You will have noted that I lay great stress on the importance of ideas. But we must realise that ideas are not hot-house plants artificially divorced from the soil. It is when men come to grips with reality that their consciousness is heightened and correct ideas spring up. The young SOYANS must not learn formulae by rote simply for intellectual delectation. A novice learning to swim does not stand on the brink of the pool coning over the rules for swimming. No, he plunges into the water and in the process of swimming he corrects his faults and perfects his methods. The Movement has acquired a system of ideas and clearly formulated principles, in the light of which it views its problems and conducts its struggles. Now, this system of ideas forged in the heat of struggle, constitutes an arsenal from which the youth draws its ammunition for the next stage. The ideas are the weapons with which you cut your path, in the barbaric jungle of South African society today.

The Importance of Ideas.

Let us look a little further into this question of the importance of ideas.

In any given society, the current ideas are those of the ruling class. Up to now, throughout successive historical stages in the development of mankind, the ruling class has always been the minority ruling over and imposing its will on the majority. How has it done this? Obviously the use of the mere physical force is not enough. It has employed other weapons at once more subtle and more powerful – the power over the mind. From earlier times, when man began to make it his business to exploit man, he devised cunning, crafty and Machiavellian methods to shackle and enslave the mind. The rulers have had their systems of

education, their myths and superstitions, all of which are calculated to prop up the particular system of society. Rulers have always recognised the importance of controlling the mind by capturing it young. The Jesuits of old had a saying: ***“Give me the young mind up to the age of seven and I don’t care what you do after that. I have him.”***

As back as the 5th century B.C., Kritias, an uncle of Plato’s and one of the 30 tyrants who instituted a reign of terror in Athens, once cynically demonstrated how to capture the minds of the people. He said:

“There was a time when human life was ruled
By force, being brutal and disorderly,
When there was no regard for righteousness,
And wickedness went unpunished. Then I think
Men laid down laws as penalties to make
Justice supreme and insolence her slave.
But even then, although the laws restrained
Mankind from deeds of open violence,
They still wrong in secret, until some
Shrewd and far-sighted thinker had the wit
To invent gods, that all who did and said,
Or even imagined evil might be afraid:
And so he introduced the Deity,
Teaching men faith in an eternal spirit,
Who sees and hears with his intelligence
And pays close heed to all men say and do.”

The nephew of Kritias, the notorious philosopher, Plato, made it his life’s work to couch myth and superstition in grandiloquent terms and elevate them to a rounded philosophy. Let it be said that Plato drew his inspiration for his philosophy from Sparta, which he regarded as the ideal State. Now the Sparta of Plato’s time was an autocracy where every man knew his place and trained to occupy that place. The system of education became famous, the essence of it being the training for endurance and

complete obedience. Of the young Spartan mind it could be said that it was "undisturbed by ideas". The result was that at a time when the other Greek states, including the city of Athens, were convulsed with democratic revolutions, Plato could point to Sparta and say: "That is the ideal Greek state. The Spartan constitution alone has remained unchanged for centuries."

How precious it is to the rulers to be able to boast that their totalitarian State has "remained unchanged for 300 years – and more".

Plato, as you know, belonged to the ruling caste in a slave society. He devoted much thought to the training of the youth of the ruling class as to how to create and maintain an ideal totalitarian state where the ruling class can live and enjoy the fruits of civilisation undisturbed by revolts of the "lower orders." To achieve this he invented what he called the "Royal Lie", which he worked out in detail. The most important part of it is the dogma that God created men of three kinds, the best made of gold, the second best of silver, and the common herd of brass and iron. Those made of gold are fit to be guardians; those made of silver should be soldiers; the others should do the manual work. Then, to quote his own words from "The Republic":

"And God proclaims as a first principle to the rulers, and above all else, that there is nothing that they should so anxiously consider, or of which they are to be such good guardians, as of the purity of the race."

Do you wonder, then, that more than 2000 years afterwards, the rulers still do homage to Plato? That part of his philosophy is the bible of the Herrenvolk.

Throughout history, rulers have attached great importance to evolving the means of controlling the minds of the people and the ideas they absorb. The subjects of any country are made to think in a particular way; from birth they are subjected to a ceaseless din of propaganda, which they absorb without knowing it. In many various it is constantly insinuated into their minds – through the system of education, the pulpit, the press, the radio,

the film, etc. On the face of it, it might seem strange that the oppressed people, who are the victims of the system, should so readily absorb ideas that are inimical to their interests. But one has to realise the enormous power of the vast propaganda machine bearing down on the people day after day and reducing their mental resistance.

It is against these ideas for the enslavement of the people that the Society of Young Africa will have to fight and counterpose to them the ideas of liberation.

THE PLIGHT OF THE HERRENVOLK YOUTH

While the propaganda of the Herrenvolk is designed for the enslavement of the oppressed, it has a boomerang effect. Those who seek to enslave are in a way themselves enslaved. Intellectually they are rotting on their feet.

Let us take a look at that section of the white population which provides the leadership of the country, that section from whose sons and daughters we got leaders in all spheres of life in South Africa – the legislators, i.e. men who make the laws that govern the very life and destiny of every member of the population; the philosophers, i.e. the leaders of thought, the people who formulate the ideas which must permeate society, ideas which influence and determine the thinking of the rest; the academicians and teachers, who pass on the ideas of the age to the younger generations; the financiers and other leaders in the industrial and commercial fields.

Let us take a look at the different stages that a child belonging to this section goes through. At birth he finds himself in a particular environment, with its sharp contrasts between rich and poor, between different skin-colours ranging from dark-brown to what is called white – the latter being associated with wealth and privilege and the former with poverty, squalor and illiteracy. With his mother's milk he drinks in the myths, the racial attitudes and prejudices that provide the soil that so easily breeds race hatreds. At school he is fed on the Great Lie that props up South Africa society, the Lie that is pumped into him through the

distortions of South African history and literature and even science and religion. Day in and day out he is impregnated with the idea of the inferiority of the Black man and consequently of his own superiority. The result is that by the time he leaves school he regards himself as a super-man.

When the time comes for to enter University, what do we find? Now a student entering the university should have certain qualities. Besides a good intelligence, he must have the open mind and spirit of free enquiry; he must have a critical and flexible mind – the very antithesis of the slavish mind that blindly accepts indoctrination; it is a mind eager to explore every realm of human thought and refuses to remain satisfied with ready-made formulae; it is a mind keen to explore the mysteries of nature and subordinate her to his needs. Standing on the threshold of the university, our young student should have withal a great humility born of the consciousness of his own lack of knowledge. And this should stimulate him all the more and spur him to infinite effort in order to equip himself with the instrument of acquiring knowledge.

It has been said: “The child is the father of man.” What manner of man is he who grows out of the youth we have just depicted? He has been armed with the tools necessary for his life’s work. If he is a sociologist, he indicated the trends in the social organism and examines the form of social organisation that will reduce to a minimum all suffering and hardship, and afford the maximum of happiness to all mankind. If he is a philosopher, he co-ordinates the data collected in the various sciences and integrates them in a unified and intelligible body of human knowledge. He enables man to see himself as part of a whole, as part of the animal kingdom, and of the universe. In doing so he helps to indicate to his fellow men the path they must follow in the great struggle for the conquest of nature. Such a man is an asset to society.

This is man as he should be. But what do we actually find in South Africa? What is the position of that White youth, the super-man, as He stands on the threshold of a university? We may assume that he has intelligence, and he has had training. But what kind of training? What has it done to this young mind?

What has it made of this youth? Instead of a healthy humility, he has arrogance, instead of eagerness to learn, he has Indifference and impatience; instead of an open and enquiring mind, he has inflexibility, a rigid attitude to ideas which in fact he dare not examine too closely. This super-man, then, puts in his time at university and emerges untouched – or shall we say, unscathed - by new ideas, spiritually stunted, intellectually bedwarfed. And at the end of it all he is let loose on society to disseminate in his turn all the racial prejudices, myths and superstitions.

This is not entirely his own fault. The university itself has done little to apply the corrective to his earlier miseducation. Nor can it be otherwise. Under the present set-up in South African society, with its existing political, economic and social conditions, the university has its function. (The University does not exist in a vacuum.) It has to propagate such ideas as are considered necessary for the preservation of the *status quo*. It cannot afford to give free rein to the spirit of enquiry; it dare not encourage the pursuit of ideas to their logical conclusion. That is why we find a philosopher like Plato, with his “golden man” still holding a position of high honour in the universities more than 2000 years after his death. There perched high on the seat of learning is enthroned Plato’s Great Lie. How fitting it is that at the very entrance gate of the University of Cape Town, the oldest citadel of learning in South Africa, there sits the stone image of the arch-imperialist, Cecil Rhodes.

Now the youth must accept as an article of faith the idea of the inferiority and superiority of a man according to his skin-colour, otherwise the present structure of South African society is in danger of collapsing. As is well known, it is the essence of a faith that it is unquestioned and unexamined. But facts – harsh facts – have a habit of hammering at blind faith and at the present time it is attacking its very citadel. Today on a world-wide scale, historical events – the triumphant Chinese struggle and its repercussions throughout Asia, in Korea, Indo-China, Burma, Indonesia, in the Middle East, the Near East and in Africa – all these are shattering the racial myth on which the Herrenvolk of South Africa has smugly rested for 300 years. Of course the conscious adherents of the Herrenvolk use the myth deliberately

to provide rationalisation for the oppression of the Non Europeans. But the more the world-wide events shatter the Lie, the more fanatically they cling to it and the more hysterically they proclaim it. Witness the recent spate of pettifogging legislation, the Immorality Acts, the Mixed Marriages Acts, etc. surely the products of a sick mind. The chronic state of crisis in the whole capitalist world together with the successes of the Non-White peoples in the East has produced an acute tension in the minds of the South African Herrenvolk. It has produced an intellectual crisis. Faced with problems they cannot solve, they fall into a neurosis. It is a sickness, which is sapping the well-being of society. The truth is, the Herrenvolk today has reached a stage of spiritual bankruptcy, intellectual stagnation, and indeed, the destruction and decay of the whole moral fibre.

What is the effect of this state of affairs on their youth, on the young men and women who inherit this way of life? Man lives by struggle. The motive force behind all his activities is his firm belief in the correctness and justice of the cause for which he struggles. What is the cause for which the White youth can struggle and give off his best? As a member of the Herrenvolk in South Africa, he finds himself called upon to defend Herrenvolkism and all that that implies. The unthinking and the thug find no difficulty in doing this; their training has prepared them for the job. But what of the more intelligent and more sensitive mind? He cannot fail to see the injustice and sheer immorality of a system that permits a few White people to batten on a whole black population. A conflict arises in his mind. He cannot give himself wholeheartedly to a cause, which his reason rejects. But he finds it difficult to cut himself adrift from his milieu, with its comforts and privileges, re-orientate his thinking and throw in his lot with the opponents of the system. This requires a strength of character of which few people are capable. The vast majority of this section takes the course of least resistance and find refuge in various forms of escapism. The most common among the so-called intellectuals is called Bohemianism. I needn't paint to you the lurid picture of this world of pseudo-art and moral perversities. It is an affliction that has blighted the young intelligentsia. It has taken great toll of the youth. And the Non-European intellectual, too, is being

contaminated by the same disease. In one form or another all society has fallen under this bight of herrenvolkism which permeates it from top to bottom.

It is against this background that we must view the idea of the Birth of a Nation. It is against this background that the conception of Building a Nation assumes its full significance. In the full consciousness of the magnitude of our tasks, we come forward to shoulder our responsibilities. We have nothing to lose. We have a world to conquer. We, the oppressed, are the only people who can throw into the struggle all our energies, convinced of the justice of our cause. We go into the struggle, not simply to save the youth, not only to save the Non-Europeans. It is a question of the preservation of all society. Our struggle here in South Africa is part and parcel of the struggle of humanity as a whole.

To the Society of Young Africa I say:

Let us get down to the task of Building the Nation!