

Author : Zachariah Matthews

44th National Conference: Address by Professor Z. K. Matthews

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Introduction:

Owing to his personal inability to undertake this responsibility which rightly belongs to him, the President-General, our Chief A. J. Luthuli, has asked me to deliver the Presidential Address at this Conference on his behalf. I naturally feel honoured in being called upon to substitute for this worthy son of Africa. As I am fully aware that it will not be possible for me to do what he would have done, for your consolation I am glad to be able to report that apart from this address there will be read to you a message from the President-General.

As you know there are two main reasons why the President-General is not able to be with us today. The first is the ban which the Minister of Justice has thought fit to impose upon him which confines him to the district of Lower Tugela. It is apparently not appreciated in some quarters that it is impossible to place geographical limitations upon the indomitable spirit of Chief Luthuli. Not only has this ban not been able to reduce the quality of his leadership, but it has converted what was otherwise an insignificant district - the district of Lower Tugela - into an important centre visited by all those who want to become acquainted with the principles underlying the liberation movement among Africans in the Union. Chief Luthuli has become the most important symbol of the liberation movement, and from his place of confinement he continues to inspire, to guide and direct the African National Congress and all those interested in seeing South Africa become a truly united country. Another reason why our President-General is not with us is because of the state of his health. As you know during the early part of this year Chief Luthuli was very seriously ill, and it is only because there are more things wrought by prayer than this world dreams on that he has made the recovery that he has made. I am sure you will all wish me to place on record our deep indebtedness to the Superintendent and the staff of the McCord Hospital, Durban for the skill and devotion with which they cared for him. But in spite of his large measure of recovery, the President-General's health does not yet permit [him] to resume his normal activities, and I am sure that before its conclusion this Conference will resolve to send him its best wishes for a more complete restoration of his health.

Crisis After Crisis

It is becoming such a hardy annual for our Presidential address to draw attention to the fact that we are meeting at a critical time in the history of our people that some of us may be tempted to treat this statement as a purely formal statement without much meaning. Would that we never yield to that temptation! The life of the African in South Africa is without doubt made up of one crisis after another. Just when our people are beginning to say to themselves that surely the situation could not get worse than this, some fresh injustice is added to their

already heavy burden, and therefore it is not necessary for us to apologise to anyone for reiterating the disabilities under which they labour and for discussing ways and means of overcoming them. The reports which will be placed before you from different parts of the country will remind us once more about what our people have to put up with day after day. The policy of baasskap shows no signs of abating. For that reason we disagree most emphatically with the latest report of the UN Commission on the Racial Situation in the Union of South Africa which claims to have found a certain measure of "gradualism and flexibility" in the implementation of the policy of apartheid. On the contrary, our experience is one of an ever-accelerating tempo and a relentless pursuit of declared objectives with a complete disregard of the consequences of the policy of separation to its victims.

Ten years ago who would have thought that the missions would be treated as they have been over the transfer of African schools to the Government? Who would have thought that one day in a country in which there was no compulsory education for African children it would become a crime for parents to give their children, at no cost to the state, the kind of education they would like them to have? Who would have thought that teachers of long standing would be dismissed from their posts on the mere ipse dixit of some official without any specific charge being levelled against them, to say nothing of such a charge being established. Who would have thought that in the twentieth century people could by a stroke of the pen be deprived of property rights which they had acquired legally, without offer of adequate compensation and be removed to some place in which they are not granted rights similar to those of which they have been deprived. We are living in a country in which freedom of speech is a privilege reserved for those who are prepared to indulge in fulsome praise of government representatives or government schemes whose implications they do not understand. However naive or blasphemous their utterances, they are committed to print in "Bantu-Bantoe" [a government publication] and given the widest publicity as representing the voice of the "Bantu". On the other hand, anyone who dares to express any doubt about the infallibility of government officials or the wisdom of government proposals or schemes runs the risk of being banned or deported or fired from his job. The freedom of Africans to meet and discuss matters affecting their welfare has been so severely curtailed that only at religious services, weddings or funerals are Africans expected to talk freely to one another, and even on such occasions they can never be sure that members of the Special Branch in some disguise are not present.

The Year 1955

The period under review - 1955 - will go down as one of the blackest years in the political history of South Africa. To give an account of outstanding political events in the year now drawing to its close is to give a sorry catalogue of assaults upon the rights of the people, and especially upon the voteless and defenceless non-white groups: the forcible removal by soldiers and police armed to the teeth of the people of the Western Areas of Johannesburg to the much vaunted Meadowlands; the threat, now being implemented in certain areas, to remove the entire African population from the Western Province of the Cape; the virtual compulsory transfer of African schools from unwilling churches and missions to the Native Affairs Department and the introduction into African schools of curricula designed to condition the

African child to acquiesce in a status of permanent inferiority in his homeland; the conversion of the status of African teachers from that of members of an honourable profession to that of cringing sycophants on pain of dismissal on the pretext of being "unsuitable" or "undesirable"; the introduction of ethnic grouping into urban locations which will promote tribal antagonism and internecine disputes, thus undermining the growing spirit of unity among them for which the ANC stands; the enforcement of the anachronistic Bantu Authorities Act for the same reasons; the creation of future slums under the so called site and service schemes imposed upon local authorities; the continuation of the system of banning and/or deporting from their homes of African leaders and the constant raids by Special (political) Branch officers of the CID on public meetings, private homes, private offices of any individuals thought to exercise some influence in their communities; continuation of the pass system and the threat of its extension to African women in 1956 - all these are measures which can by no stretch of the imagination be described as conducive to the promotion of a peaceful state of mind among those who are subject to them.

But the Africans are not the only people whose fundamental rights and freedoms have recently been adversely affected by governmental policy. The implementation of the Population Registration Act has given other sections of the population some idea of the meaning of bureaucratic regimentation; with the application of the Group Areas Act the spectre of complete ruination faces many an Indian community. The enforcement of the Senate Act and the passing of the Quorum Act has removed the scales from the eyes of many who clung to the belief that certain things just could not happen here.

The result of the relentless pursuit of its policies by the present government is that South Africa is a land that is becoming more and more divided against itself. Co-operation between different sections of the population in the political sphere becomes more and more difficult. The government is becoming more and more resentful of criticism. Honest differences of opinion on matters of policy are regarded as evidence of subversive activities. But even those who do not express any opinions at all are not safe from being looked upon as being behind the failure of the government to get anything other than either downright opposition or lukewarm support for its schemes.

The Brighter Side

But the picture of 1955 is not entirely without its brighter side. Every cloud has a silver lining. If this is the year which saw the further whittling down of the civil rights of the people, it is also the year during which the Congress of the People was held. There were several wonderful things about the Congress of the People. The first is the fact that it was held at all. Here for the first time was a Congress which brought together people drawn from all sections of the population to consider and give expression to their vision of the South Africa of the future. The sponsoring organisations issue a challenge to any other group of organisations including the Nationalist Party to convene a similar conference and see whether they could evoke an equal or a better response from the people of South Africa. A most important aspect of the Congress was the adoption of the Freedom Charter. That document is going to be placed before this

Conference in the course of your deliberations. I shall therefore not say anything about it at this stage except to remind you that the Freedom Charter was drawn up, not by the African National Congress but by the Congress of the People and it is therefore necessary for you to ratify the Freedom Charter and to make it part, if you so desire, of the policy of the African National Congress. But to my mind the most significant thing about the Congress of the People was the dignified behaviour of the people in the face of what any less disciplined people might have regarded as extreme provocation. What undiscerning [persons] thought was just a rabble which could easily be roused to acts of indiscretion proved to be a group of people imbued with a singleness of purpose and a devotion to a cause from which they could not be diverted by intimidation. That was the people's finest hour.

No, this year has had its compensations. Not only among those attending the Congress of the People, but even among those who were not in a position to participate in that august assembly, it is abundantly clear that the people remain undaunted by the trend of events in South Africa. This is particularly so among the women who have been galvanised into action by the government's threat to subject them to the humiliations of the pass system. This is probably the most dangerous scheme that the government has ever embarked upon, and there can be no doubt as to where responsibility belongs for whatever may happen. Again and again the leaders of the people have warned the government against subjecting African women to the indignities and the abuses associated with the pass system. But this warning has fallen on deaf ears. African men have in the past, rightly or wrongly, done their best to keep African women out of political agitation, but it seems that the government is determined to drag African women into this fight. One need not be termed an alarmist for taking a gloomy view of what is likely to come out of this development.

Another bright spot has been the magnificent response of the people of South Africa to the appeal of the Catholic Bishops for funds to enable that church to retain control of its primary schools for Africans. The success of that appeal is proof, if proof were needed, that it is a mistake for the government to think that the people of South Africa are solidly behind them in their educational policy for Africans. The African people are deeply indebted to the Catholic Church for the effort it is making to maintain the place of voluntary agencies in the African educational system, thus preventing the system from degenerating into the dead level of uniformity which is going to be the curse of Verwoerd's Schools already groaning under the burden of proclamations and regulations which are destructive of all initiative and character.

The cultural clubs which have been started in certain centres and the family centres which the diocese of Johannesburg, under the able leadership of the Bishop of Johannesburg, is establishing will help to broaden the outlook of the African child and lead him to an appreciation of the fact that being a servant of the white man does not represent the sum-total of his destiny in South Africa. The conception of the fundamental aim of education which runs through the syllabuses that have been drawn up for African schools is that the individual exists for the group. This totalitarian idea of treating people in the mass rather than as individuals who count in and for themselves is a doctrine to which we do not subscribe. The regimentation

of people which it implies can never be condemned enough, especially in the modern world which tends to worship size and quantity rather than individuality and quality.

What does the Government hope to achieve by these methods? Are we wrong in suspecting that the object is the conversion of the African people into a docile population of yes-men and yes women who are continually singing the praises of their fairy godfather - the government - who will say "thank you baas," whatever is done to them? Is that the kind of people we are expected to become?

The Task of ANC

It is not necessary for me to remind you that we have not inherited such attitudes from our forefathers. Our forebears in this land fought back every inch of the way in defence of their homeland and of their freedom, and although they lost many a battle no one can say that they did so because of lack of courage or poverty of spirit. Why should a kind of supine submission to everything be expected from their descendants?

The African National Congress was founded specifically for the purpose of fostering among the African people that love of freedom and determination to be inferior to none in the land for which their forefathers gave their lives on many a battle field. The African National Congress has since its inception been in the forefront of the battle for equal rights for all in this country. As an organisation with such objectives it has never been popular among those who believe in the permanent subjugation of the African people. All kinds of attempts have been made to discredit the organisation. This happened in the past just as much as it is happening today. The leaders of the ANC have at various times been described as agitators or as anti-white or as extremists or as communists - whatever the popular political swear-word of the time. It has been suggested at various times that the ANC is dominated by one or other group of non-Africans - sometimes it is Europeans, at other times it is Indians that are held responsible for doing what is called stirring up or "inciting the Native". But all these ideas are wide of the mark. Those of us who know something of the inner history of the ANC know that our strength does not come from sources outside of ourselves. In fact it can be said without fear of contradiction that the most constructive work in the building up of the ANC has always been done by the Africans themselves. Naturally we have had our friends and supporters among other racial groups represented in South Africa, for among them also are to be found outstanding examples of individuals who are devoted to the cause of freedom for all. God forbid that it should be otherwise. But our best friends have always insisted, like our leaders, that it is the efforts of the African people themselves which will bring about their liberation, and that it is lack of effort on the part of the African people themselves which will be responsible for retarding their march to freedom. No, it is a great mistake to [place] today the blame for what happens among the African people upon the wrong shoulders. If there is anything that should be blamed for the Africans' determination to be satisfied with nothing less than first-class citizenship, it is that urge to freedom and self-determination which has been planted in every people. Nobody ought to appreciate that better than the Afrikaner people whose history as a small nation is a proof of the irrepressibility of that urge. What the Afrikaner has achieved for himself he cannot possibly

deny to the African people except at the cost of the embitterment of the relations of black and white, to his detriment no less than to that of the African.

The only reply which the African can give to the official racial discrimination to which he is subjected in this country is the strengthening of the African National Congress. In spite of all the onslaughts that have been directed against it by the government and by the puppet organisations or individuals that sometimes masquerade as spokesmen for the African people, the ANC remains the vanguard of our struggle for liberation. It has been and is being chastened and purified by the attacks to which it is subjected and therefore becomes more and more precious to us. It therefore behoves every member of the African National Congress to work for its success and for the spread of its spirit into every household. Now that we are confronted with the almost Union-wide prohibition of meetings, our slogan must be "Every Home a Branch and Every Branch a School." Wherever two or three are gathered together, there the gospel of the ANC must be preached, until the principles for which it stands become part of our very nature.

But the ANC must not only become a powerful mass movement, it must become a movement distinguished for the sense of responsibility and the high ideals by which its members and its leaders are inspired. The ANC is no place for individuals who do not know what they are about. The task which confronts the ANC is a serious one affecting the lives of millions of people. There is therefore no room in this movement for place-seekers and people who regard public affairs as a kind of parlour game in which the people are merely pawns. There are organisations which can be joined by those who are interested in the theoretical study of the problems affecting the African people. We have no quarrel with people who are interested in knowledge for its own sake. But the ANC is an action group, not a study circle. This does not mean that members of the ANC must not make a close study of the questions with which it is confronted. Action, if it is to be sound, must be based upon prior analysis and careful study of the facts of the situation. But the process of study and analysis must be followed by a programme of action which the members must seek to carry out to the best of their ability. The Programme of Action of the ANC was adopted in 1949 after protracted deliberation not only in the Annual Conference, but in the Provincial Conferences and in our branches throughout the country. I know that it is felt in some quarters that the Programme of Action is in need of review in the light of developments that have taken place in the liberatory movement in South Africa since 1949. But although there may be amendments in points of detail here and there, I am of the opinion that the fundamental principles on which it was based have stood the test of time, namely, African nationalism, the claim of the right to self-determination and co-operation with other sections of the population strictly on the basis of equality. The nationalism which we express is not the narrow nationalism which seeks to exclude others from South African nationhood as we are excluded today but a broad nationalism which is all-inclusive, with no position of special privilege for any group such as we find is the case in this country today. The right of self-determination which we claim is not a right to set up some sort of Rantustan in some undefined and undefinable place, but a right to equal opportunity in all spheres of life in South Africa as a whole, as we know it. The co-operation which we seek with others is not one in which others shall determine what our destiny shall be and expect us merely to acquiesce like sheep led to

slaughter. Our motives may be questioned, the practicability of the objectives which we have set ourselves may be doubted, the length of time which must elapse before our aims are realised may be unascertainable, but our faith in ourselves and in our destiny need not be shaken on that account. We need not be deterred from our goal by lack of immediate results in the practical sphere. We can have immediate results in the spiritual sphere by freeing our minds and spirits from the bondage of those who believe that they have no power in themselves to help themselves. It is only to the extent that we achieve this spiritual freedom - the freedom of men created in the image of God - that we shall be able to work for the improvement of the physical conditions under which we live. The implementation of a programme of action requires careful organisation and sustained effort. In the carrying out of a programme of action the worst enemies of a movement are those who are interested in sensations and excitement and have no time for the routine work which must both precede and accompany the implementation of any programme if it is to achieve success.

In the course of the Conference you will be called to discuss and make preparations for various campaigns which form part of our programme of action. You will be asked to give careful consideration to the adoption of the new Constitution and to the improvement of our organisational machinery. In dealing with these matters we must be on our guard against the temptation to indulge in cheap sensationalism and in facile optimism regarding the difficulties which confront us. The odds against us are great enough in all conscience. Let us not add to them by our failure to face up to them and to assess them realistically. In the decisions and resolutions which we adopt let us be faithful to the trust reposed in us by those who have sent us here and who look to us for sound leadership in the perilous days that lie ahead.

In the course of this Conference, after you have adopted the new Constitution you will be called to elect a new National Executive to guide and direct the affairs of the ANC for the next three years. On behalf of the President-General and, if I may say, of myself as Deputy President-General during the past year, I should like to express my appreciation for the loyal support and co-operation we have received from members of the outgoing Executive. That Executive was elected in 1952 and since then one by one the members of our National Executive have been muzzled in one way or another by the government in its attempt to stifle the voice of Africa. In spite of handicaps and difficulties which I need not detail here, the Executive has carried on its work to the best of its ability. Our thanks also go out to the Secretarial Staff, which has throughout carried a very heavy burden. As long as we can get such devoted service from our members, the idea of Freedom in our Life Time will be realised. Finally a word of appreciation must be said about our friends and allies in the SAIC, the SACPO, the COD and other organisations and individuals who in spite of the interpretations and abuse to which they are constantly subjected by those who fear the unity of all the people of South Africa have co-operated with us in all our endeavours.