

# CAPE DEMOCRATS

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## INTRODUCTION

Why write a book about one of the smallest of over six hundred organizations that were affiliated to the United Democratic Front? Why write about one of the most middle class, whitest affiliates, and one that was active for barely over two years? The lengthiest study of the UDF, the three hundred and seventy one page *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983-1991* by Jeremy Seekings, does not even mention the Cape Democrats in its list of Abbreviations nor in its Index.

Among the reasons, three stand out. First, this pays a small historical tribute to some remarkable Capetonians who showed unusual courage to defy the disapproval of most of their white community, and repression by the Special Branch; unusual integrity in choosing to sacrifice much of their personal life and time; and unusual modesty – most of them don't like being personally written about.

Second, the Cape Democrats was neither born out of nor disappeared into a vacuum. In the history of the living liberation movement, Cape Democrats is not only organizationally born out of the UDF's Claremont and Observatory Area Committee, but also culminated in continuity in the Claremont-Rondebosch, Mowbray-Observatory, Woodstock-Salt River, and Central City branches of the African National Congress.

Cape Democrats' creation and existence clearly strikes all sorts of historical resonances with its obvious predecessor, down to even its name, the Congress of Democrats of the 1950s. It clearly strikes all sorts of resonances with some of the current tensions and dynamics in South Africa, especially within the Western Cape, and within the ANC's Western Cape structures. Their on-going tenacity makes this topic important to both scholars and citizens.

Third, the very concept of a Cape Democrats shows some of the circumstances, dilemmas, and paradoxes that persist around the theory and practice of non-racialism in highly racist societies. The heated ideological debates both within the African National Congress, and between it and its political rivals, about the choice of non-racialism gave the minute proportion of white members of the South African liberation movement an importance more than that of dissenting aristocrats who joined the French or Russian revolutionary movements.

At times during the 1980s for example, a major division between organizations in the broad liberation movement was over the principle of non-racialism. Sometimes, political party rivalries aggravated these debates. The principle of membership exclusively for persons from an oppressed group causes only rare criticism when practised by feminist organizations, for example.

But to the African National Congress and its allies, the very intensity with which white racism saturated the fabric of apartheid society and the texture of daily life, made it all the more imperative both that the majority's lived experience should encounter non-racial white individuals for the first time in their lives; and that the white minority should witness non-racial practices. Tomorrow's dreams are ever born out of the womb of today's practices.

## CHAPTER 1

### CAPE DEMOCRATS LAUNCHED

Many sacrifices would have to be made by members of the Cape Democrats, Dullah Omar said at the organization's inaugural conference on 24 April 1988. But the vision to create a society free of oppression and exploitation would make sacrifices worthwhile.

Dullah Omar, then Western Cape chair of the United Democratic Front, spoke in his personal capacity. He praised the Cape Democrats for their courage in launching an anti-apartheid group at a time when anti-apartheid activists were being detained. His speech written for the occasion focused on building the morale of the minority of whites who supported majority rule, and defusing the white establishment's hostility.

White democrats were in a difficult position. They were the only race group subject to conscription, and operating in a sector that broadly accepted apartheid's divisions and inequities:

"For every democrat who has a family, this poses tremendous problems and causes many traumas."

However, the struggle was designed to not only free the oppressed from oppression. It's also designed to liberate whites from their insecurities, the degradation, dehumanization and brutalization to which all South Africans are subject.

Apartheid made white children into the instrument of an aggressive apartheid regime, dehumanizing them. Therefore whites have as much stake as blacks in the struggle for peace and democracy. He noted how many whites lived, worked and did business in every African state. They preserved all their cultural values and religion.

"The same kind of propaganda which the regime saturates South Africa with was used against the liberation organizations in Zimbabwe." The South African liberation movement was founded on non-racialism. Dullah's next point raised the living tension between the movement's ideals and structures: "To ensure that the South Africa of tomorrow will be democratic and that there will be respect for every South African, our organizations of today must be committed to these principles upon which the new South Africa is to be based."

Cape Democrats are launching their ship in very stormy seas and things were going to be tough. State of Emergency censorship and propaganda left people totally misinformed about what was happening in the country. One of the Cape Democrats' main duties would be to keep themselves and their communities informed.

The Cape Democrats' work was bringing more whites into the democratic movement: "The more whites that join the struggle the less the polarization will be one of colour, but one based on those who are fighting for democracy and those who are fighting against it." (*South*, 28 April-4 May 1988)

The Cape Democrats' first resolutions condemned apartheid as "fundamentally evil" and

- demanded the scrapping of all racist laws, withdrawing the military from the townships, and ending the State of Emergency;
- the release of Nelson Mandela and all other political prisoners and detainees;
- the unbanning of all organizations; and
- negotiations with the ANC.

Cape Democrats pledged themselves to strive for a South Africa with universal franchise and education, equal rights for all without regard to race, class, gender or sexual preference, and enjoying basic necessities such as food, housing and medical care.

The inaugural conference resolved to work as an extra-parliamentary organization not competing with the parliamentary opposition. It also called for conscientious objection to be recognised. (Session 1 Policy Resolutions)

Cheryl Carolus, at that stage on the run from detention without trial (subsequently the ANC's Assistant Secretary-General, then High Commissioner in London, today in business) spoke briefly on the importance of white democrats demonstrating the non-racial commitment of the liberation movement.

The launch has the typical organizational hiccups which seem hilarious in retrospect, but harassing on the spot. The UCT janitor was late, so the hall could only be opened late, at 10am. Neither air conditioning nor the public address system worked, despite assurances that they would. (letter 1 May 1988). UCT apologized, and waived the hiring fee.

Rosemary Meny-Gilbert, the treasurer, reminisced five years later about the launch of the Cape Democrats. The launch took six months of hard work from November 1987; we had constant meetings – fortnightly. Max Ozinsky was involved until he had to flee the country. Amy Thornton was under house-arrest within four months. Sheila Lapinsky was not on the committee, but was very involved in helping. Rosemary went as a member of the Black Sash to the Joint Forum. This was an incredible amount of work, making banners, painting slogans, madly working until the last moment. People were bussed in via UDF structures for the launch.

Those of the UDF's white members who were not students, youth or women, were always having to explain that we formed Area Committees because they couldn't slot us into an "understandable sector", such as one of the above. We were very effective on a number of occasions, making statements at a number of meetings. We made up media packages, and an information pack to give to interested persons at public meetings. My main task was treasurer: "When committee members asked for more, I asked: how did you spend the last lot? T-shirts, etc?"

Back at varsity, “we were really scared of blowing up balloons in ANC colours.” One or two individuals watched for some time; we could never be sure who was a police spy. (interview 1993)

John Greene, vice-chair, also recalled some of the dynamics and ambivalences behind the founding of the Cape Democrats. The UDF, he noted, was always “schizophrenic” over the Cape Democrats and the Five Freedoms Forum. On the one hand, Dullah Omar was positive. On the other hand, the township structures were saying: why are you getting involved with the Democratic Party? Over the Open City Campaign, the UDF preferred to have a slight distance, and let the Cape Democrats rather than directly themselves get involved.

In Johannesburg the Five Freedoms Forum had several thousands of members, but in Cape Town it never really got off the ground; about half a dozen people formed the *ad hoc* Five Freedoms Forum Committee. Its problems were that people thought that Cape Democrats was for that sport of issue, so the talks faded out. Cape Democrats helped launch the FFF at the Arthur’s Seat Hotel. Amy Thornton and Michael Green spoke at the press conference.

Among highlights John recalled were the Red Ribbon campaign in April 1989, and the Defiance Campaign, desegregating the Strand beach, the “purple rain” march, and then March of Hope. (interview: 1993)

24 April 1988n saw the inaugural conference of the Cape Democrats of some 120 people in a hired UCT lecture theatre. For its public launch on the 4<sup>th</sup> May, the executive flew Helen Joseph, Frederick van Zyl Slabbert and Father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa down from Johannesburg to address some 1 500 people in the City Hall. A member of the George Civic Association spoke of the threatened forced mass removal of the Lawaaikamp squatters in PW Botha’s former constituency, Jennifer Fergusson and the United Womens’ Congress choir sang between speeches. (circular 8 May 1988)

Right from the start, Cape Democrats’ meetings debated the heated controversies of the day amongst anti-apartheid whites, such as the academic boycott and militarization. Amongst whites, the academic boycott was amongst the most divisive issues between leftists and liberals – with the leftists being outnumbered by the liberals. Militarization debates ranged from draft-dodging and conscientious objection, to apartheid’s version of the military-industrial complex, and the “Total Strategy” secret counter-revolutionary committees called “Joint Management Centres”.

After the inaugural conference, the Claremont-Observatory Area Committee would cease to exist, or more precisely revert to what should have been its proper form: one delegate from each UDF organization in that area.

Cape Democrats’ minutes reveal that its executive committee met weekly for over two years, with a punishing number of sub-committees all doggedly pushing ahead with various tasks. Its first meeting had

Amy Thornton (chair)

John Greene (vice-chair)  
Debra Marsden (organising secretary)  
Rosemary Meny-Gilbert (treasurer)

With Alison Billings, Tony Combrink, Johnny de Lange, Ilana Korber, Bo Petersen, Sue Philcox, and Jojo Shapiro making up the rest of the committee. They set membership fees at R40, R60 for doubles, R10 for students and pensioners, and swiftly got down to business. (EM: 31 May 1988)

It set up an ambitious number of sub-committees for cultural activities, education, media, membership, and projects. Ilana Korber tried to organize house meetings around professional groups. The education sub-committee floated Freedom Charter Day commemorations on 26 June, while the cultural sub-committee suggested for the 18<sup>th</sup> July a Mandela birthday party. (EM: 7 June 1988)

Very swiftly, four on-going problems raised their heads. First, organization for the Freedom Charter Day was “very good”, but there was weak attendance by the whites meant to be the Cape Democrats’ constituency. Second, the Exco decided to contact anti-apartheid lawyers to deal with any possible defences against repression, and that Exco members would accept the duty of visiting members who has been harassed by the Special Branch – the secret political police.

Third, Tony Combrink would translate into Afrikaans the pamphlet *Cape Democrats: Who are we?* Fourth, the organization had only R960 in the bank; hiring the Cathedral hall cost R400, and another R400 was earmarked for a birthday gift for Mandela. (EM: 28 June 1988)

Even in the two years’ existence of the Cape Democrats, one of the shortest-lived organizations of the liberation movement, these four definitive themes came to determine the parameters of the possible:

- the marginality of support for the liberation movement amongst the ruling and privileged whites;
- the police state, even in its dying days;
- tensions caused by different classes and cultural sensibilities amongst English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites opposed to apartheid; and
- even for the middle class activists at the height of foreign donations, getting the most activities out of nursing available funds.

## CHAPTER 2

### PREHISTORY OF CAPE DEMOCRATS

Why were there organizations orientated to ethnic constituencies in an avowedly non-racial liberation movement? And in a movement, to boot, that had suffered its worst split, the secession of the Pan-Africanist Congress in 1959, [partly over the principle of non-racialism?

Both the rationale and problems of Cape Democrats within the United Democratic Front evoke resonances with the Congress of Democrats and how it fitted into the Congress Alliance of the 1950s.

Then, the African National Congress (founded in 1912) and the South African Indian Congress (going back to the Natal Indian Congress of 1894), helped set up a Coloured People's Congress and a Congress of Democrats (for white supporters) around 1953. These ethnically-orientated organizations then linked up with the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW), to form the Congress Alliance.

Consider the dynamics of when Charterists began above-ground re-organization in the 1980s for the first time since the great repression of 1960. The UDF set up new organizations for what they called "sectors". One by one, different segments of whites peeled off to join the United Women's Congress (UWCO), the South African National Students' Congress (SANSCO), the Gardens (GAYCO), Cape (CAYCO), and Mowbray (MOYOCO) Youth Congresses, Students United for Christian Action (SUCA), Jews for Justice (JfJ), and various school crises groups for parents. Bit by bit, this left behind a remnant of non-women, non-youth, non-parents, non-Christian, non-Jewish: that is, atheist, mostly male, childless, adult intellectuals. Further, those white supporters of majority rule would not be satisfied with membership of an organization whose *raison d'être* was parenthood, gender, or school, but wished to mobilize for general political issues, such as the struggle for democracy.

What happened was that the Area Committees, set up as local coordinating structures with one delegate from each UDF affiliate organization in that part of town, unintentionally became organizations of last resort for the white intellectuals. These virtually entirely English-speaking white groups had met as the Claremont, "Upper Obs", and "Lower Obs" Area Committees, the names reflecting Cape Town's suburb named after South Africa's oldest astronomical observatory. As some members dropped out, and others were drawn into other UDF affiliates, the declining membership led to first the amalgamation of the Upper Observatory Area Committee ("Upper" meaning above Lower Main Road, an area popular with students) with the Lower Observatory Area Committee (below Lower Main Road). Next, the Observatory and Claremont Area Committees amalgamated around 1986.

Meetings were typically two-thirds to three-quarters women; at one meeting all present except the author were women. This is phenomenal for political parties, and could have two explanations. Either, the UDF had a stronger feminist dimension than any other political organization in South Africa. Or, most men regarded the Area

Committees as marginal in importance, and so instead competed for dominance in other, township affiliates. Other centres with English-speaking anti-apartheid whites also set up shorter-lived local variants of the Cape Democrats:

- the Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee (JODAC), the first off the ground;
- Grahamstown, meaning in practice Rhodes University students, academics, plus a few Black Sash and Christian activists, founded the Grahamstown Democratic Action Committee (GRADAC); with its counterparts in the
- Durban Democratic Association (DDA), and the
- Pietermaritzburg Democratic Association (PDA).
- Briefly, windy city activists started the tiny Port Elizabeth Action Committee (PEAC) which once got the astonishing number of one thousand whites in a “march of hope” to walk towards the township to symbolically bridge with local comrades.
- East London activists arranged seminars on history and topical issues with out of town speakers (their organization called ELAF).

The Cape Town UDF produced its magazine *Upfront*, while the Eastern Cape produced a short-lived newsletter *The Democrat*. (Draft: c. 1989)

Cape Town, where Charterism’s white intellectuals faced far more competition and criticism than in any other town from both liberal and unity movement organizations, were the most reluctant of all to join an ethnic constituency organization. Cape Democrats, to enrol specifically white members, was consequently amongst the last of the UDF’s organizations set up.

Different perspectives, not necessarily mutually exclusive, detail the strategy which led to three of the UDF’s Cape Town Area Committees help launch the Cape Democrats, and then revert to their *pro forma* role.

The Cape Democrats own documents concede that the apartheid regime’s great strength was its ability to rally whites overwhelmingly in support of a policy of repression. The End Conscription Campaign and Five Freedoms Forum on the Witwatersrand have tried to influence white attitudes. The Claremont and Observatory Area Committees were

“singularly unsuccessful in drawing whites into the UDF [because these] structures, composed mainly of young activists, were simply not geared to accommodating people not able to dedicate large amounts of time to political activity.”

One document reports that In June 1987 these area committees launched an investigation into the feasibility of setting up a new autonomous organization. They prepared a discussion document and circulated it throughout the UDF, and finally in November 1987 a meeting of a large number of white Capetonians sympathetic to



the UDF agreed to form the Cape Democrats. Cape Democrats' founders saw their purpose as

- providing a political home for white democrats;
- influencing important sectors of whites who are not interested in joining the democratic movement;
- disorganizing strategic elements within the ruling bloc;
- to ensure that the voice of white democrats should be heard within the democratic movement; and
- to encourage skilled personnel to commit themselves to staying on in a future democratic and non-racial South Africa.

The document noted that Charterist strategy had achieved previous membership growth "by organizing people politically around their own experiences, consciousness and material realities." (MOTIVATION: c.1988)

The author's own recollection of attending every Claremont Area Committee meeting is that members were simply told by activists such as Tony Karon that the UDF National Executive had given the Area Committees an ultimatum to set up a white democrat organization by a deadline of June 1987. After that the Area Committees should then reconstitute themselves as intended: not for individual members but one delegate per organization in their area. To the best of this author's memory, he was never at that time shown any of the discussion documents referred to above. Members simply debated the directive of the UDF National Executive, and its motivation.

The initial formulation of an organization for whites was objected to strongly by Menan du Plessis and others. This author for example, (noting that the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages had been repealed two years earlier) asked if two UDF members were husband and wife of different colours, would they be forced to join two separate affiliates?

Some of the responses by activists were, for example, the great difficulties in trying to unite NUSAS and SANSCO. The militant style popular with SANSCO, with demands for the support of MK and guerrilla war, frightened off white students who, beyond a tiny handful of activists, simply would not support such demands. The formulation was then revised to an organization orientated towards the white constituency through its choice of focus on human rights issues, and its non-militant style, but open to all.

CHAPTER 3  
POLITICAL WORK IN A POLICE STATE

One contemporary leaflet for members read:

**SECURITY GUIDELINES**

**A. GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR MEMBERS**

**Telephone:**

**Assume that all telephones are tapped (telephones in rooms can be used to record). Therefore be cautious about giving information over the telephone – personal contact is preferable in certain instances.**

**“Chat”:**

**Be guarded and sensitive about “idle” chat / gossip about either Cape Democrats or other organizations. Even though our work is legal, some of it is sensitive.**

**Documentation:**

**Do not keep unnecessary documentation or informative material that may incriminate either you, Cape Democrats or other organizations. Do not take C. D. documents to other meetings and vice versa.**

**Media:**

**Always check with lawyers any media, posters etc. before printing.**

**Minutes & diaries:**

**Minutes are essential for referral and as a record, but only minute what is absolutely necessary and leave out sensitive material. Keep minute book in a safe place.**

**Keep diary entries to a minimum and try to spit information, e.g. do not put all information about a meeting or venue in the same entry. Cut down on phone numbers kept in diary.**

**Meetings / workshops:**

**Work on a “need to know” basis only. Use phone as little as possible when making arrangements. When appropriate, use personal contact only. Keep messages of time / venue as brief as possible. Use prior meeting place and have venue known to min. number of people if meeting or people attending sensitive. Have back-up plan**

**in mind if meeting is likely to get banned and an escape route if necessary.**

**Harassment:**

**If you are harassed by odd phone calls / strange mail or directly by security police, make a written report immediately afterwards (noting details and impressions), and inform Exec. or Sub-comm convenor. Keep calm and try not to overreact. Seek personal support if needed.**

**B. IF YOU FEEL YOU MAY BE IN LINE FOR DETENTION:**

**Keep your personal life in order! Give someone power of attorney, see that someone knows about any practical / personal needs you may have i.e. medication, next of kin, doctor, etc. If you have responsibilities in Cape Democrats, make sure other know of them. If you have any problem that requires legal assistance or advice, then our lawyers are:**

**Justin Hardcastle, Mike Evans, Melissa Palmer**

**... all at 419-4411 (w), or**

**Johnny de Lange at 47-8867 (h)**

**Learn LEAP pamphlets 2 and 3. Bear in mind that everyone has an individual response to detention; it is better to avoid answering questions, be consistent, disown knowledge (unless published info.) Do not make written statements, never swear under oath, particularly to a magistrate unless you have a lawyer present. When using a receipt, cross out empty spaces. Have a check list in your home of what to ask policemen when they visit.**

**C. RESPONSE TO POSSIBLE INFORMERS**

**Be able to identify the person clearly. Try to get verification of details / facts. "Rumourmongering" is dangerous and counter-productive both to the individual and the organisation, but unfortunately informers are a fact of life and each case has to be considered seriously and with sensitivity. If you feel you have justifiable reason to suspect someone, please report to a member of the Executive and so not then go around spreading rumours.**

## CHAPTER 4 CAPE DEMOCRATS' FIRST YEAR: 1988

To the grassroots members, Cape Democrats' centred around all the activities, slogans, rallies, canvassing & campaigns. To the leadership, planning strategy for the long-overdue overthrow of apartheid, the broad perspective required a focus on how the Cape Democrats helped publicity for the UDF and ANC; how Cape Democrats made a contribution to the overall UDF and a "mass democratic movement".

Cape Democrats, in its chair's words, saw its twofold task as bringing the aspirations of the democratic movement to whites in Cape Town, and bringing whites into contact with the democratic movement. (Letter: 15 August 1988)

Although lying in living memory, it already takes an effort to recall the climate of fear in the apartheid police state erected by Verwoerd and Vorster, the remorselessness of three decades of harassment grinding activists down.

Cape Democrats' records contain many hints of the organization's, and individuals' security problems. At least one individual was asked to meet the executive to discuss his membership, due to members' complaints that he was a police spy. (Letter: 23 August 1988)

The bland words of the "Security Guidelines" reprinted in the previous chapter scarcely convey the dreary hassles each paragraph meant. As well as the WW2 interlude of phone-tapping of the far right, the phones of liberals and left-wingers were tapped *continuously* from the early 1950s to the early 1990s – two generations.

At best, a phone could only be used for arranging to meet a person. To pass on a message or rendezvous involved then having to drive for perhaps thirty-five minutes halfway across town or the suburbs to speak perhaps three sentences, and return. If the activist was not fortunate enough to afford to own a car, it would involve waiting at bus stops or train stations, travel by public transport, walking to the friend concerned and return, totalling up to two hours. Rose Meny-Gilbert remembers all "the times I spent Sunday mornings driving off to a checkpoint, & then waiting to be told where to go for a meeting." (Meny-Gilbert: 1993) This author recalls the irritation of having many times to drive from his home in Claremont to a rendezvous such as the Rondebosch railway station car park, only to be told there to drive to the actual meeting which was being held in Claremont close to his home!

At times or in circumstances of worse repression, it would be reckless to use the phone at all. One then had to take one's chances that the comrade you were visiting would be in, or return for a second visit. Obviously, if the comrade was not at home, one could not leave a message in a letterbox or under a front door, in case anyone was following you or keeping the place visited under surveillance. They could retrieve a written message from a letterbox, or use skeleton keys to open a front door.

The "chat" caution echoes Britain's WW2 poster slogan *Sealed lips save ships*. On the other side, of media, the apartheid use of printing and censorship laws

to persecute radicals could fill a chapter on its own. Even in a major city like Cape Town, a student organization or the Liberal Party of the 1960s, could get six or nine printing firms in a row refusing to print a perfectly lawful leaflet or magazine because it was “communist”, or just “political”. In smaller towns such as *Saamstaan’s* experience in Oudtshoorn, not to mention the *Weekly Mail’s* experience in Johannesburg, not one local printing firm would accept a printing job. It took a long drive out of town to get to a printing firm that did not refuse business because of fear of threats and harassment from the Special Branch – and a long drive back, a drive back that included police roadblocks intercepting delivery vans and seizing “communist” newspapers. The same applied to the *Namakwa Nuus*.

It would be one-sided melancholia though, to not also record the exuberance, humour, camaraderie and comradeship of the civil war epoch. The same exco minutes which plan protests over Amy Thornton’s detention also record the following exchange:

Alli[son Billings]: “John, are you disagreeing?”

John [Greene]: “Can’t disagree with myself.”

Chorus from all: “You’d be surprised in this executive!” (EM: 27 September 1988)

August 1988 saw the Cape Democrats celebrate the UDF’s fifth anniversary alongside NUSAS, JODAC, FFF, Durban Democrats and the End Conscription Campaign – and within a week, protest against the Government’s ban on all activities of the ECC. (EM: 17 & 23 August 1988)

Cape Democrats’ leadership also reported on links with a different type of constituency, this time class. Chris Ball, Bokkie Botha, other businessmen and the Urban Foundation had formed the Consultative Business Movement. (EM: 17 August 1988) The UDF, in a strategic alliance with COSATU, also sought tactical alliances with any anti-apartheid executives in business. Bokkie Botha had long been prominent in management negotiations with organized labour; Chris Ball was to be hounded out of the country by a revengeful PW Botha, and to bounce back into the public limelight in 1995 as head of the Olympic Bid Company.

Building up alliances, and clarifying its own role more clearly were major concerns of the leadership. Typically, many activists were simultaneously involved in several organizations, for example the Cape Democrats, women’s, youth and others. Not surprisingly in such a blur of activity, squeezed in at personal cost on top of a career or studenthood, one individual organization could lack discipline or coherence as its focus oscillated between the UDF’s and its own activities.

One of many four- hour executive meetings eventually settled on the proposition that “Cape Democrats role is to provide a home for whites wanting to participate in the national democratic struggle and build non-racialism by bridging the gap between different areas.” It should encourage political analysis and discussion amongst its members. (EM: 13 September 1988) The rule of thumb test should always be: “How many minds have we changed? How many, whose minds are changing, have we provided with a home?” (EM: 6 August 1988)

By November of that year committee members were complaining of meeting burn-out. The vice-chair relinquished several portfolios, the treasurer said she could only manage every second meeting from then onwards, while many noted that minute-taking limits political development and participation. (EM: 22 November 1988) Nevertheless within months Cape Democrats had grown from an initial 130 members to around 390, inviting to house meetings everyone from the Black Sash to CAPAB.

The Education and Information Subcommittee arranged a popular series of seven weekly lectures on an introduction to the politics of the democratic movement, with attendance of between ten to eighteen persons per talk.

## CHAPTER 5 LINKS TO THE PAST: WAVE OF THE PRESENT

Who were the tiny minority of whites who joined the liberation movement during the 1950s, and again in the 1980s? Some were socialists or other leftists, some were liberals. Most were intellectuals who came from NUSAS or other student organizations. Some had not been to university, but their commitment evolved from Christian or Jewish principles.

*Amy Thornton*

Modesty, a dislike of personal publicity and humility may be a testament to the character of Amy and the other Cape Democrats' leading lights featured in these thumbnail sketches - but makes life harder for the historian trying to coax out details!

Amy Thornton was the only member of the Cape Democrats who could be called one of the liberation movement's golden oldies (a phrase she dislikes). Any pen sketch of her links the struggle and generation of the 1950s, the Congress Alliance epoch, with the 1980s, the United Democratic Front epoch. Her life testifies to the ups and downs of the struggle.

Born in 1932, Amy's first political protest was in 1948, as a sixteen year-old, putting up posters saying: DON'T VOTE NP!

She first became involved in *Hashomer Hatzair*, a Marxist-Zionist youth organization (there were such things in the 1940s!) At the University of Cape Town, where she graduated as a school teacher, she became involved with the Modern World Society, the biggest socialist student organization. Amongst her UCT student contemporaries were Ben Turok (the oldest ANC MP at 84 years old) living in Noodehoek; Dennis Goldberg, after a life sentence as a Rivonia trialist now living in retirement in Hout Bay; Albie Sachs (now, minus an arm, a retired Constitutional Court judge); and Pallo Jordan, twice in the cabinet and now an ANC back-bencher.

She was involved in organizing the Cape Town delegates to the Congress of the People – but never arrived. The police stopped the delegation at a Beaufort West road block, and arrested them on a legal pretext. If *the law is not concerned with trivialities* apartheid's Special Branch certainly was.

The Special Branch, and the Liquidator, the appropriately-titled apartheid apparatchik, listed and banned Amy from 1959-1973. She was not only banned from all political activity, but also banned from her livelihood as a teacher. During the 1960 State of Emergency after Sharpeville, she was detained without trial in Caledon Square police station. Kept in solitary confinement, Amy wrote the Freedom Charter, which she knew off by heart, on the walls of her cell in eye-shadow pencil. A warder threatened that she would be shot if she didn't rub it off.

Married in 1966, she had one son and three daughters.

Yvonne Shapiro

Yvonne is representative of the 1980s generation of student activists, and came from the Claremont Area Committee.

Alison Billings

Sue Philcox

Laurie Nathan

Sheila Lapinsky

John Greene



## CHAPTER 6 FIRST LIGHT BEFORE DAWN: 1989-1990

Cape Democrats decided not to participate in the October 1989 municipal elections, but to campaign to popularize the concept of “One City, One Future”

Cape Democrats recognize that there are other anti-apartheid forces that have decided to participate in the municipal elections in the white areas. We respect the fact that different organizations have adopted different strategies, and feel strongly that this does not preclude an alliance of democratic forces on a more long-term basis.

Cape Democrats resolved not to undermine the election campaigns of progressive candidates standing in municipal elections in white areas. (press release: n.d.)

Tensions caused by different class and cultural sensibilities amongst English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites opposed to apartheid also challenged the new left-type culture of the Cape Democrats. Four months after its inauguration, Cape Democrats started to arrange Afrikaans translations of its pamphlets. It attended a meeting with Christo Nel, hoping to encourage young Afrikaner progressives to get in touch with the democratic movement, eroding away, however slightly, at the Government’s political base. (EM: 17 August 1988) It noted the importance of broadening its white constituency to add strength to resisting government curbs on the press. Cape Democrats hoped to start meetings amongst Afrikaners in Stellenbosch, Somerset West, and Elgin. (EM: 30 August 1988) The agenda of the next Exco meeting focused on “the need to address Cape Democrats’ role in the Afrikaans constituency.” From this time on, its stationery had a bilingual letterhead *Cape Democrats / Kaapse Demokrate*. (EM: 8 September 1988) It sought to make the democratic movement become a presence in Afrikaner discourse, and to try to establish forums for anti-apartheid “Afrikaners to meet Afrikaners”. (EM: 27 September 1988)

One member from Ottery wrote a five page letter of resignation in 1989, saying the sub-culture of the English-speaking, middle class Cape Democrats did not offer him a platform to work amongst the constituency from which he came, the white artisan class, often holding racist views. He noted that Cape Democrats had supported CCAWUSA workers on strike at a hotel, but on other occasions he had had snide remarks made when taking up other bread and butter issues. (Letter: 12 February 1989)

Regretting his resignation, the organizing secretary commented that Cape Democrats were aware of and grappling with those issues, and would appreciate discussing with the ex-member the best way of succeeding. (Letter: 28 March 1989) Slowly, talk of an *Afrikane Demokrate* moved to fruition.

In August 1988 the Cape Democrats adopted the Freedom Charter as a political position, and affiliated to the United Democratic Front. This produced a predictable response.

While secretly the apartheid regime had been episodically negotiating with the ANC in New York and elsewhere in exile since 1986, it sought to keep a strong bargaining position through continued episodic repression right to the end. With the detention of over 1 000 activists in 1989, including Amy Thornton the previous year, who was yet again, for the last time, placed under Special Branch restriction orders, the Cape Democrats launched its Red Ribbon Campaign in March 1989.

All members wore red ribbons to publicize a fortnight's campaign over the hunger-strike of detainees, and to pressure the weakening regime into releasing our detainees. Dullah Omar (later the Minister of Justice), Amy Thornton, and Mary Burton (long-standing president of the Black Sash) co-signed a protest statement:

Try to imagine being woken at four in the morning and told that you are being detained. No one will tell you what crime you have committed, and it's no use trying to get a lawyer, because you will not be taken to court...

This cruel system has claimed many lives, and with no other means to protest against their plight detainees have put their lives at risk in hunger strikes to draw attention to detention without trial.

Those who wear red ribbons – the colour of life – are saying that they heard the cries from the prisons and that they add their voice to the call: release ALL detainees. (8 March 1989)

The Cape Democrats also gave solidarity to the Yengeni Support Group, the Save the Press Campaign, Save the Patriots Campaign, and many others. The trial of Tony Yengeni sensationally exposed to the censorship-blinded South African public gruesome Special Branch torture during interrogation, and also the first published expose of the covert "askaris" used by counter-revolutionary special forces.

Leftist organizations oscillate between suspicion of the political acceptability of funding sources, and a lack of funds far more serious than for those causes supported by business. Funds occasionally came from:

Canadian High Commission, via its Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives;  
Foundation for Peace and Justice;  
Interchurch Coordination Committee for Development Projects.

One prelude to the unbanning of the liberation movements was the formation of the Mandela Reception Committee on 6 November 1988. Release Mandela committees and amnesty committees had been formed episodically before, from the tenth anniversary of the Republic in 1971, through 1980 and again, and as episodically banned by the Special Branch. The Western Cape RMC include all the left "sectors": trade unions, a few professionals and business organizations, Christian and Muslim organizations, civic, women, youth, student, service, cultural, and unemployed workers' organizations, and some struggle media. They had to decide whether or not to try to include "other tendencies" – a euphemism for political

rivals, such as Unity Movement activists seeking to mobilize through SACOS. The seven page report of its founding included a perceptive analysis:

As a result of experiences over the last ten years, we have some ideas in our heads as to how we would like to see organizations built and activities take place. We are saying for example that we must build up organizations, we must see to it that our activities are organizationally based, that we build up a leadership which is accountable to organizations and that we don't build up demagogues and individual "Gods". Otherwise the mass activity of our people and sacrifices could be hijacked. Now these were ideas which we had learnt from our struggles.

At the same time repression has taken its toll. Organizations had been destroyed at many levels. Fragmentation had taken place, the union movement was weak and divided. Large sectors of workers who should be in COSATU were not in COSATU. COSATU is constantly fighting a situation where there is insufficient participation by workers in their structures and where there is far too much reliance on and therefore dominance by officials. In the wake of repression, undemocratic practices also crept into structures such as civics and youth organizations... whilst the state aims to remove us from our base and prevent the masses from participating in our organizations. (Report of the MRC: c.1988: 4-5)

There was always tension between theory and practice. To what extent were practices such as singling out Mandela as a symbol of martyrdom, instead of together Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and all the Rivonia generation of prisoners building up a "God"? To what extent was getting innumerable rallies to chant "Boe-sak! Boe-sak!" instead of other chants and slogans such as "UDF!" building up a "God"? A middle class organization like the Cape Democrats was the last one in the UDF to use populist practices, but the liberation movement as a whole had to face many classic dilemmas of politics.

Most United Democratic Front organizations never recovered from the mass detentions and repression of 1986-87, and the banning of all activities during 1988-89. The leadership then relied on celebrity clerics, both Christians and Muslim, and COSATU and its major affiliate unions, named "the Mass Democratic Movement", to spearhead public events and statements until the UDF judged repression had lessened enough to announce its own unbanning in 1989, followed by de Klerk's formal unbannings.

The establishment of Cape Democrats was only one example of the covert persistence of ethnicity in structures. The UDF Youth seemed integrated on first impressions. But a closer analysis would show that, for example, at the University of the Western Cape, coloured students tended to be active in the Cape Youth Congress (CAYCO), while African students dominated the local branch of the South African National Student Congress (SANSCO). In 1982, a year before the UDF was formed, Africans pulled out of the Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (CAHAC), which from then on

only represented tenants and owners in Coloured and Indian group areas. The African civics formed the Western Cape Civics Association (WCCA).

Hindsight makes political scientists look less wise than historians. At the level of UDF zonal structures in Cape Town, the Southern Suburbs Zone reflected English-speaking whites. The Unity Zone and Townships Zone reflected Xhosa-speaking Africans. The Rest of Townships Zone (giving the unfortunate acronym ROT in some UDF documents) reflected Afrikaans-speaking Coloureds. On the one hand, such organization facilitated communication by supporters in their home language, and enabled local organization to choose the nuances optimal to mobilize support in their neighbourhood. But the downside was of course mirroring the statutory political ethnicisms the regime sought to entrench and inflame.

The great unbannings of 2 February 1990 – ANC, PAC, SACP, and all the others – led to the UDF Youth and Women's affiliates renaming themselves *en masse* as the ANC Youth and Women's Leagues. The student and civics affiliates of the UDF decided to not affiliate to the ANC, but remain autonomous as SANSCO and the South African National Civics Organization (SANCO), while the religious and other affiliates faded away within months, as they could not affiliate to a political party.

In the immediate following months, Cape Democrats hosted a series of lectures by returning white exiles such as Professor Jack Simons in April and Albie Sachs on 10<sup>th</sup> May. The Cape Democrats had planned to work through 1991, but now could formally wind itself up in 1990. Its leading members worked enthusiastically through mid-1990 at setting up local branches of the ANC. The first issuings of ANC membership cards to euphoric activists were at meetings in Bellville, a Community House (Salt River) meeting for the City Bowl and neighbouring suburbs, and in Claremont for the southern suburbs. Most of the Cape Democrats' former members became members of the ANC's new branches at particularly Claremont (today named the Gaby Shapiro branch), but also of the Mowbray-Observatory branch, the Woodstock-Salt River branch, and the Cape Town Central branch (Alex la Guma branch).

One astonishing surprise awaited UDF members who joined the ANC. The UDF's Western Cape patron and most popular orator, dominee Allan Boesak, did not join until a year after the unbanning of the ANC. He said he had qualms about the communist links of the ANC. The press speculated that he would only join the ANC if promised some important post. In fact, Alan Boesak only joined the ANC shortly before the public announcement of his election to the post of Western Cape chair of the ANC, with Christmas Tinto standing down. Few guessed at the time that this equivocation was an omen of events to come.

## CHAPTER 7

### “... A REALITY WE THAT BARELY WISHED TO ADMIT”

Non-racialism had been at the heart of one of the debates around whether to form or not to form the Cape Democrats, and will be briefly explored here. Hindsight allows us to better assess the Cape Democrats' impact and heritage in what is a perennial South African issue.

Four years after the Cape Democrats had wound up, Nelson Mandela's opening address to the ANC's 49<sup>th</sup> National Conference focused on a major task ahead:

“One weakness whose significance transcends the narrow interests of the ANC, is the extent to which poorer sections of the Coloured and Indian communities found solace in the racist mobilization of the National Party, and voted in a manner that demonstrated fear of their counterparts amongst Africans.

It brought put in sharp relief a reality that we barely wished to admit. In class terms, it is a tragedy that working people from these communities should respond with fear to the prospect of their brothers and sisters attaining equality.

Like a predator at the smell of blood, the National Party latched onto this, an exercise which can only widen the racial chasm ... It is also a challenge to us that while many whites recognised the legitimacy of the ANC and correctness of its positions, they chose to vote on a basis of racial sentiment.

This makes the challenge of deracialising South African society one of the most important campaigns we have to undertake.”

Why was there a need for the multi-racial Congress Alliance to organize itself in uni-racial affiliates? Why was much of this pattern again repeated in the UDF? The UDF's Cape Democrats clearly followed the precedent of the 1950s Congress Alliance's Congress of Democrats. The separate organization of CAHAC and the WCCA brings to mind the Coloured People's Congress v. the ANC in Cape Town during the Congress Alliance's decade. These dynamics raised the issues of continuing Africanism within the ANC, African v. Coloured v. Indian racisms, and conflicts of interest.

The ANC zonal structures, with such a close coincidence to ethnicized borders, showed a carry-over from the UDF. On the other hand, the rival political organizations most non-racial in theory, such as the Democratic Party (today DA) or the Non-European Unity Movement (today New Unity Movement), remained in the 1980s and 1990s either minute in membership, or unable to attract many black African members, or both.

The Non-European Unity Movement, notwithstanding it renaming itself the New Unity Movement in 1985, became derelict precisely when the mass

political parties were rapidly enrolling hundreds of thousands of new members. The total NUM membership of around four hundred is less than many individual branches of the ANC. Indeed, after sixty years the NEUM-NUM could enrol less members than the number of Coloureds who joined the apartheid National Party within a year of it abolishing its “whites only” restriction on membership! This is clearly why the NUM has always evaded releasing its membership figures publically. The last time the *Sunday Times* mentioned the NUM was over two decades ago, when its political correspondent commented:

“It has raised the principle of non-collaboration to levels of inaction bordering on an art form. As a result it is difficult to find anyone who regards it with any degree of seriousness.” (SUNDAY TIMES: 15 December 1991)

Similar analysis applies to other UDF rivals that went defunct, such as the Cape Action League which merged into the Workers’ Organization for Socialist Action (WOSA).

Some African ANC members alleged that Coloured and Asian ministers and ANC officials tended to appoint other Coloureds or Asians around them, rather than Africans. During 1994 a Western Cape township branch delegate complained at an ANC General Council meeting that paid jobs in the ANC provincial office went to Coloureds, while Africans were only unpaid volunteers. (personal observation) Within one year the office situation changed radically.

Individuals also made similar allegations against the energetic Trevor Manuel, then Minister of Trade & Industry (oral communication 1995) and Jay Naidoo (SUNDAY TIMES 2 July 1995). In fact, both ministers’ political appointments were non-racial teams reflecting the rainbow nation. Such perceptions, or misperceptions, show not only jockeying for positions, but the intenseness of South Africans’ colour consciousness, even on the left.

One African ANC MP was alleged to have exhorted during an election campaign meeting in Gugulethu: “we cannot be ruled by people on the other side of the railway line”. (oral communication 2 March 1995) The listener understood the context as not the southern suburbs railway line separating the overwhelmingly white suburbs from the Coloured ones, but the Cape Flats railway line separating African Nyanga from Coloured Mannenberg.

This came to a head with a walkout from the ANC Youth League of outvoted branches in coloured areas. Denunciations of “African chauvinism” heard for years verbally from ANC supporters, now began to appear in print. (eg. Letters SUNDAY TIMES 6 February 1995; ARGUS 11 July 1995) The breakaway youth wing activists remained ANC members, but inaugurated the Community Youth Movement at Genadendal. (SUNDAY TIMES, Cape Metro 25 June 1995).

Writing off African debts for municipal services produced strong pressure for similar write-offs for coloured townships, argued Rev. Chris Nissan. (SUNDAY TIMES 16 April 1995)

Lerumo Kalako, when Western Cape MEC for Sport & Recreation, condemned private sector job adverts for “Xhosa-speaking applicants only” as discrediting affirmative action: “Insisting upon Xhosa-speaking applicants is not affirmative action as the government sees it.” (SUNDAY TIMES 2 July 1995) Both ANC and NP provincial leaders united in condemning corporate affirmative action which discriminated against Coloured and Asians, for Xhosa-speakers only. (ARGUS 12 April 1995) Mandela used his opening speech to the Montagu Muscatel Festival to strongly repeat such sentiments. (WEEKEND ARGUS 29/30 April 1995) In effect, corporations caricatured ANC affirmative action policy, a more Catholic than the pope attitude, probably reflecting anxiety to curry political favour and state contracts.

In practice, the business version of affirmative action is sycophancy to perceived power. Since blacks, not women, are perceived as the new ruling strata, it is unsurprising that one survey found the ratio of companies practising AA for Africans: women as 64:20. (CAPE TIMES BUSINESS REPORT 8 June 1995). Two decades later, shifts in Government application of AA renewed controversy.

The *Argus* supports the ANC rival, the Democratic Party (now Democratic Alliance). In the same issue that gave leader page profile to the new African head of the DP Youth, and its non-racialism, the newspaper highlighted claims that “Nissen has been under intense pressure from blacks in the party to give up his position in favour of a black leader ... Racial tension between Coloured and black members of the ANC has been worsening in the province, with blacks trying to oust coloureds from key positions.” (WEEKEND ARGUS 22/23 July 1995)

The *Argus* also reported how many of those Coloureds who joined the National Party Youth Action were more racist than many whites and routinely referred to Africans as “kaffers”. (WEEKEND ARGUS 15/16 July 1995) But both the *Argus* and *Cape Times* repeatedly avoided reporting Jan van Eck’s public speeches where he recounted how he was held up getting to a Mandela election rally in Steenberg during 1994 by DP Youth Wingers. Wearing their DP & Zac de Beer rosettes, they blocked him for ten minutes, chanting: “*van Eck, jy hand die land na die kaffer; van Eck, jy hand die land na die kaffer.*” (“van Eck, you hand the country to the nigger.”) (personal communication). The DP never apologised for, or even disassociated itself from these public displays of racism. It shows, at the least, that many working class Coloureds who flocked to the DP in early 1994 perceived it, like the NP, as an anti-ANC bulwark against the *swart gevaar*.

Other large political parties also showed signs of internal ethnic tensions. A few African IFP MPs complained of a disproportionate number of white IFP MPs. Buthelezi accused one or two regional white KZN MPs at an

IFP rally of undermining the party by leaking a document to the media. (CAPE TIMES 6 June 1995). The Asian MPs of the IFP were denounced for laziness. Ethnically labelling and smearing his own MPs clearly increased racial tensions within the IFP (SUNDAY TIMES 23 July 1995) and doubtless demoralized some non-Zulu supporters of the IFP. A plethora of mushroom organizations popped up in the media, all purporting to stand up for coloured interests (eg. WEEKEND ARGUS 29 July 1995), but are rarely heard of subsequently.

Culturally, crossover music such as that popularized by Johnny Clegg's band helps create a synthesis culture to defuse ethnic tensions. By 1995 some crossover groups mixed *boeremusiek* and *mbaqanga* to start *BoereQanga*. (SUNDAY TIMES 25 June 1995)



## CHAPTER 8 AFTERWORD

The Cape Democrats took white membership up from some 40 members of its Claremont, Observatory, and Gardens Area Committees to around 400 members, most of whom joined ANC branches in their suburbs as these were founded in mid- and late 1990. Amy Thornton and other leaders of the Cape Democrats played a role in leadership of these ANC branches. The daunting challenge is: will the dismantling of *de facto* ethnic structures for non-racial structures within the ANC leave it overwhelmingly of one ethnic group, & marginal within others? Can the ANC be the first to make the mass breakthrough?

The Western Cape Province presented the toughest challenge to the ANC for the 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014 general elections. That the most popular ANC Coloured leaders in the Western Cape such as Trevor Manuel and Cheryl Carolus were transferred from provincial to national responsibilities weakened the ANC's local electoral appeal.

Initially, non-racialists pointed to the contribution to polarizing African and Coloured politics made by the covert endgame projects of propaganda and patronage of the SADF and the National Security Management System. For example, between 1985-1991 the apartheid regime of the *Nasionale Party* spent over eighty-eight million rand on Project Kompong, the Global Coloured Project, and the Coloured Parliamentarians' Project. (CAPE TIMES: 10 May 1995) During the 1994 election campaign, the NP printed two photo comic books widely distributed amongst Coloured voters. These were classic *swart gevaar* (black peril) and *rooi gevaar* (red peril) propaganda, depicting a Coloured family being evicted from their home by black African squatters, being fired from their job to be replaced by an African, while a black teenager with an AK-47 threatens to kill a Coloured woman on her way to church if she does not turn back. But as the decades pass, continued attempts to blame all ethnic conflicts on the apartheid regime will decline in persuasiveness.

By the time of writing, 2013, ANC branches in the predominantly white suburbs of Cape Town had all fizzled out, as had many in the predominantly Coloured suburbs and townships. The ANC decided in 2013 to abandon attempts to gain a share of the white voters in the 2014 election. (ANC Claremont branch meeting, 25 July 2013; CITY PRESS 1 September 2013)

This does not mean that all the UDF concern over political work in the white community was in vain. In the epoch that marked the climax of the liberation struggle, and the interregnum, the presence of white members in the liberation movement had an importance out of all proportion to their numbers. They affirmed the Congress movement ideology that this was a struggle against a system of white racism, not against the whites as such. Congress movement strategy was concerned that the liberation struggle should not degenerate into an all-out race war. Unlike the mass white flight out of Algeria in 1962, and from Angola and Mozambique in 1975, the overwhelming bulk of whites did remain as citizens of a democratic South

Africa. During the 1990s, whites constituted “the ruling bloc” until 1994, and remained the overwhelming majority of the managerial and professional classes, until sufficient blacks had the opportunity to graduate as accountants and architects, doctors and engineers, lawyers and pilots, psychiatrists and statisticians. ANC policies ensured that a white brain drain was slow enough to allow the economy to replace them by new black graduates, until the international depression starting in 2008 ended the brain drain, and saw a black brain gain from other African countries. ANC non-racial and conciliatory policies during the 1990s also ensured that capital flight was far less than otherwise. In short, ANC non-racial policies had an importance far above the symbolic number of whites who joined the party as members.

This contrasted with practice amongst ANC rivals. AZAPO was blacks only until about seven years after liberation. The Cape Action League of Neville Alexander took policy that whites might only be rank and file members, but that “the sons and daughters of the ruling class”, their euphemism for whites, could not be elected to any post or position in leadership. The UDF insisted on non-racialism in membership to the extent of refusing to compromise on this principle, even when it meant that there could be no unity with the National Forum, AZAPO, or other organizations.

The apartheid regime’s persecution of the End Conscription Campaign, and its actions against other predominantly white affiliates of the UDF indicate that it judged them to be a threat, and part of a “total onslaught” against white supremacy.

One ANC branch did survive in the predominantly white, middle-class suburbs of Cape Town: the Claremont-Rondebosch branch, now renamed the Gaby Shapiro branch in honour of her as a leading activist who helped found the original branch, then as part of the Cape Democrats. Gaby, who passed away from cancer, was also the mother of the famous cartoonist and satirist Jonathan Shapiro, who publishes under his pen name Zapiro. When the Observatory-Woodstock ANC branch died, the Gaby Shapiro branch expanded to offer a home to all ANC members in the three municipal wards, 57 – 59, between Claremont to Woodstock. Some of its leaders include surviving activists from the UDF Claremont-Mowbray Area Committee, and from the Cape Democrats, who still remain active citizens in a democratic South Africa. The rising ranks of black professionals and students today form the majority of this branch, which has slightly over one hundred members.

## ANNEXURE 1 MOTIVATION FOR FUNDING FOR LAUNCH OF CAPE DEMOCRATS

### Introduction

Cape Democrats is an extra-parliamentary political organisation working in the white community in the Western Cape.

It aims to provide a “home” for whites who are sympathetic to the United Democratic Front and who want to be more closely involved, alongside blacks, in the struggle for a non-racial democracy in South Africa.

Cape Democrats was formed in November 1987 and officially launched in April 1988. At the launch an executive body was elected made up [of] the Chairperson, Vice-Chair, Secretary and Treasurer and six other members who fulfil various other roles e.g. press-liaison, national and regional link and cultural link.

After workshopping what our main areas of activities would be with our members, the following sub-committees were agreed upon: Membership, Education/Culture, Media and Projects. The Executive is represented on each sub-committee and they in turn report back to Executive for discussion on a monthly basis.

### The Aims of Cape Democrats

The historical record of the last few years has demonstrated vry clearly the determination of National Party government to cling to power. Despite the immense loss of legitimacy that it has suffered, the government has amply proved its capacity, in the medium-term, to rule through force and repression.

What this demonstrates, is the necessity for the democratic movement to make a concerted effort to change white attitudes.

Ultimately the main strength of the government is its ability, particularly in periods of unrest and crisis, to rally whites behind a policy of repression. If peaceful change in South Africa is to become a reality, it is essential that whites be won over to the idea of a negotiated settlement leading to a non-racial and democratic society.

Over the past few years a number of initiatives, including the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) and the Johannesburg-based Five Freedoms Forum, have emerged to try to begin the process of influencing white political attitudes.

This too, is essentially the task that Cape Democrats has set for itself.

Unlike the Five Freedoms Forum or the ECC, however, Cape Democrats sees itself as very explicitly trying to make the politics of the democratic movement

– the UDF, COSATU, NECC etc – accessible to whites and, in turn, drawing whites into that politics.

At our inaugural launch, resolutions were passed to adopt the Freedom Charter and to seek affiliation with the U.D.F.

#### Historical Background (see Appendix A for detail)

The main impetus for the formation of the Cape Democrats came from the Claremont and Observatory area committees of the UDF.

Ever since the formation of the UDF these committees had been trying to bring the message of the UDF to whites. Although a number of successful public meetings were held, the area committees were singularly unsuccessful in drawing whites into the UDF.

This was partly due to the fact that the area committees, as ad-hoc structures composed mainly of young activists, were simply not geared to accommodating people not able to dedicate large amounts of time to political activity.

This failure eventually led to a major rethink, and in June 1987 an investigation into the feasibility of setting up a new, autonomous organisation was launched. A discussion paper was prepared (cf Appendix B) and circulated throughout the UDF. Finally, in November 1987, at a meeting attended by a large number of white Capetonians sympathetic to the UDF, the decision was taken to form Cape Democrats.

#### Proposal for a non-racial political organisation primarily concerned with organising within the white community

##### 1. Political Line

The organisation seeks to affiliate to the UDF, which implies accepting the Freedom Charter, because:

1.1. We have found that a growing number of white people want to be part of the democratic movement through participation in the UDF.

1.2. Our affiliation to the UDF will distinguish us from other organisations working in the white areas.

1.3. Our affiliation will ensure that we are accountable to the democratic movement.

1.4. It will provide us with links to other UDF affiliates.

1.5. It will enable people in the white areas to contribute to the UDF and the processes of the democratic movement.

## 2. Tasks

### 2.1 Our primary tasks will be:

- a) To provide a political home for white democrats;
- b) To influence important sectors of people who are presently not interested in joining the democratic movement;
- c) To disorganize strategic elements within the ruling bloc.

### 2.2. We have seen that previous organisational advances of the democratic movement have been achieved by organising people politically around their own experiences, consciousness and material realities. It is therefore important:

- a) to intervene in the white community and to develop strategies which will shift larger numbers of whites into the democratic movement. In fulfilling this task we are advancing the non-racial component of the democratic movement;
- b) to take advantage of existing fissures and win support from traditional allies within the ruling bloc;
- c) To develop a very wide outreach beyond our membership, and to extend the influence of the democratic movement into the white community.

### 2.3. We believe that the voice of white democrats should be heard within the democratic movement.

### 2.4. We feel it is necessary to encourage skilled personnel to commit themselves to contributing to a future democratic and non-racial South Africa.

## 3. Programmes/Activities

### 3.1. Being directly represented on UDF structures, we will participate in UDF campaigns, and take forward the demands of the democratic movement.

### 3.2. We will address fundamental political questions, interpret and explain the political beliefs and aspirations of the democratic movement and in doing so win support for the struggles fought by the masses. For example, we will take forward campaigns and demands such as for the unbanning of the ANC, the release of detainees and political prisoners, the ending the State of Emergency, troops out of the township.

### 3.3. We will participate in campaigns and alliances with other organisations working in our areas; for example the Free the Children Alliance, the Votes for All Alliance and the End Conscription Campaign.

- 3.4. We will intervene in ongoing political debate in the white community around issues such as:
- \* The post-Apartheid economy
  - \* The process of negotiation
  - \* Repression and militarization
  - \* The Group Areas Act and separate amenities
  - \* Open schools
  - \* The Regional Services Councils
  - \* Tax
  - \* Civil liberties and human rights
  - \* The Bantustan system and forced removals
  - \* Crime
- 3.5. We will identify sectors of the community where it is important for us to work including, for example, the business community, the academic community, and the churches.
- 3.6. We will provide forums for political debate and education.
- 3.7. We will provide creative activities to facilitate the participation of people not wanting to make too large a political commitment, as well as providing for people who want to be more actively involved. A range of levels of involvement, from defiance to special interest work to mere attendance of meetings, will be provided.

#### 4. Membership

- 4.1. We will encourage dual membership of democrats working in organisations like ECC, the Black Sash, EDASA, NUSAS etc. We are not intending to “poach” members from these organisations, but expect that part of their work will be to take the message of Cape Democrats into their organisations.
- 4.2. Membership will be gathered from all over Cape Town and perhaps more widely. There will probably be a branch structure with sub-committees and a more committed core.
- 4.3. Although we will organise in the white areas, membership will be open to all.
- 4.4. Different types of membership are envisaged, including:
- a) Activists from our previous area committees and other comradesly organisations;
  - b) Members of other organisations, for example, professional and political groupings, who will participate in our organisation and its political forums but might see their main commitment to their other organisations.
  - c) Presently unorganised Capetonians, for example, people who have

come to us through house-meetings, placed themselves on our mailing lists, or attended an occasional meeting or activity.

d) People presently untouched by our political work.

## 5. Profile, Image and Leadership

5.1. An authoritative organisation of white democrats clearly identified as part of the democratic movement.

5.2. A broad and accessible profile that will facilitate older/professional people joining us and finding a political home.

5.3 Our leadership should reflect the range of extra-parliamentary organisations operating in the white areas. It should thus include prominent individuals and people from other organisations. We must also consciously develop a leadership from within the organisation. This leadership should be elected, accountable and visible.

5.4. We will project a dynamic pro-active profile, with a programme of action consisting of demands to be met as preconditions for negotiating a non-racial, democratic South Africa.

5.5. We will establish comprehensive internal education programmes to develop the political consciousness and maturity of all members, as well as allowing for their special interests.

## 6. Broader Structures

The organisation will probably form a component of an umbrella Area Committee with organisations such as UWCO, CAYCO, church groups and other local groupings. It should link to current regional structures as well as have direct representation at the UDF General Council. There will thus be a need for clear procedures of mandating and decision-making at all levels.

## APPENDIX A

NOTE: The following paper was prepared by the Observatory / Claremont Area Committee of the UDF and was circulated for discussion throughout the UDF and its affiliates in the Western Cape. It probably remains the clearest statement of the political role that Cape Democrats is intended to fulfil.

### An Organisation of Democrats in the White Areas?

#### Introduction

Over the past while, thousands of white South Africans have begun to reject apartheid and look for new political homes. There is thus an urgent need to establish structures that can begin to incorporate these potential democrats into the progressive movement.

In certain instances, this has already begun. For example, the student sector has a fairly long tradition of organisation in NUSAS, while more recently, young conscripts have been mobilised by the End Conscript Campaign (ECC). There are also moves to establish branches of youth and women's organisations in the white areas that can affiliate to existing UDF organisations. Many professionals are beginning to join alternative professional bodies. Finally, many women have become involved in the struggle through an organisation such as the Black Sash.

However, there is as yet no structure/s in Cape Town that can mobilize and organise in the white areas on a large scale and more importantly, give many older white South Africans a political home in the progressive movement. To this end, the Claremont / Observatory area committee of the UDF, through a ten-week commission of inquiry and much internal discussion, have come up with a number of proposals.

We would like these to be examined and debated in the various forums of the UDF, within UDF affiliates, and by other progressive organisations/ We ask that comrades consider these proposals seriously, and see them as a concerted effort to broaden and strengthen the ranks of the democratic movement.

### Motivation

The leading force in our struggle for national liberation is the black working class. This means that the main task of the democratic movement is to mobilize and organise among the oppressed and exploited masses.

There are, however, a number of secondary tasks that complement the struggles of the masses. One of these is the need to organise in the heart of the ruling bloc itself. More specifically, this means systematic work amongst white South Africans as the holders of privilege and power.

There are a number of good reasons why this work should be done. If the ruling bloc can be weakened the task of the democratic movement is made easier. One of the historical strengths of the apartheid regime is its ability to organise whites into a solid cohesive group, willing to defend their privileged position through support for harsh repressive measures against our organisations. There is an urgent need to try and break this unity, and to widen the cracks that have already begun to emerge.

However, we must be clear at this point. We do not claim that it is work in the white areas alone that causes the major tensions and contradictions within the ruling bloc. It is the hammer blows of the mass movement that cause the splits and cracks to appear. It is the united strength of the people's organisations that sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of those who have traditionally supported the apartheid system, and which causes the cracks in the ranks of apartheid to deepen.



This is precisely what has happened over the past few years. There are now many whites who know that Botha no longer offers them security and a stable future. They are beginning to look towards extra-parliamentary forces such as the UDF. But these whites will not make the break with their past attitudes and political organisations unless we reach out and organize them.

White South Africans seldom join the struggle by chance. This is because it is generally in their material interests to support apartheid, or at least not to fight to get rid of it.

When white South Africans begin to feel the “heat” of the progressive movement, during times of mass mobilization, they are more ready to attend meetings, read pamphlets or the alternative press, and even identify with the actions of the oppressed and exploited. However, it is not sufficient to leave it at this. If we are not able to provide a political home in the democratic movement for whites mobilised during periods of mass activity, then most will drift back into the narrow confines of white reactionary or reformist politics.

Most white democrats who are in the ranks of the people’s camp are there because they were reached by an organisation at some stage of their lives – either when they were at school or university, or when they were faced with questions such as the call-up. They were organised into the democratic movement.

### Proposal

Our main proposal is to establish a non-racial, democratic form or organisation that is directed at those areas where, because of the Group [Areas] Act, white South Africans tend to live. We are not proposing that a “white organisation” be established, either locally or nationally. No members of the areas committees expressed any wish to work in a white-only organisation.

On the contrary, all members of the areas committees voted for the new organisation to be an affiliate of the UDF, working closely with all the other affiliates on joint campaigns of the Front.

Our proposal for a non-racial form of organisation is consistent with all other affiliates of the UDF in the Western Cape. For example, the Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (CAHAC) is not regarded as a “coloured organisation”, despite the fact that it only organises in those areas defined as “coloured” by the Group Areas Act. Similarly, the Western Cape Civic Association (WCCA), is a non-racial organisation, despite the fact that it only has “African” members.

It is the very emphasis on non-racialism that we believe will enable us to draw more white South Africans into the democratic movement. It is through our active membership of the democratic movement that we can begin to provide leadership and direction to white South Africans.

ANNEXURE 2  
CONSTITUTION OF THE CAPE DEMOCRATS  
- AS ADOPTED AT THE INAUGURAL CONFERENCE ON 24 APRIL 1988

1. PREAMBLE

Apartheid is indefensible. It has caused immeasurable suffering and hardship. It has isolated us from the lives and experience of the majority of South Africans.

We acknowledge the tradition of resistance which has always welcomed any person committed to the ideals of non-racialism and democracy. We believe this places a special responsibility on those of us who have been privileged by apartheid to accept this challenge. We affirm that we have a role to play in building the future of our country so that it may be a secure place for all its people.

We are committed to a peaceful and just solution to the conflict in our country. If it is to be a truly non-racial solution, we believe that all must participate as equals in the creation of the new South Africa.

We commit ourselves to the democratic movement and resolve to stand side by side with all peace-loving South Africans in our struggle for a just society.

2. NAME

The name of the organisation shall be CAPE DEMOCRATS.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 3.1 To strive for one person one vote in a unitary South Africa free from all forms of oppression.
- 3.2 To bring white South Africans in large numbers into an organisation committed to the democratic movement.
- 3.3 To build non-racialism in practice by creating forums where democrats from all communities can work together.
- 3.4 To broaden our understanding of democratic principles and practices through interaction with organisations of the majority.
- 3.5 To educate ourselves about the realities of our country and overcome our fears and prejudices.
- 3.6 To speak out against the injustices of apartheid and in support of other organisations committed to the same struggle.

4. MEMBERSHIP

- 4.1 Membership shall be open to all persons irrespective of class, sex, race, religion or nationality.
- 4.2 Members shall subscribe to the aims and objectives of Cape Democrats.
- 4.3 No person shall be given membership if his or her aims and objectives are in conflict with those of the Cape Democrats.
- 4.4 Before any person shall be given membership he or she shall first have to apply for membership to the Executive Committee (Exco). The ExCo shall review all

applications for membership and shall have the power to refuse a person membership. Where the ExCo has refused a person membership, that person shall have the right to appeal to the General Council (GC), and shall have the right to present his or her case to the GC.

ANNEXURE 3  
THE FUTURE OF THE UDF  
[n.d., probably February or March 1990]

## PREAMBLE

In the absence of a legal ANC, the UDF fulfilled the functions of a visible national political leadership and national coordination of mass campaigns. Changing circumstances as a result of repression caused the UDF to evolve a sectoral approach, giving rise to the formation of national youth, student, education and other organisations.

The consistent struggles of our people forced the apartheid regime to unban the ANC and SACP; this has directed the UDF to rediscuss its role and character. It is evident that while the ANC is in the process of re-establishing itself legally, mass campaigns and struggles must be deepened. Mass organisation must culminate in national sectoral formations that must simultaneously be built with the mass based ANC.

This workshop therefor recommends the following for discussions:

### 1. THE FUTURE OF THE UDF

1.1 The UDF must continue to exist and function

1.2 The period until December should be considered a TRANSITIONAL period during which the political and organisational changes which takes place will TRANSFORM the UDF;

1.3 This process must be regularly reviewed, taking into account:

- a. the prevailing political conditions, in particular the BALANCE OF FORCES
- b. the extent to which the pre-conditions in the HARARE DECLARATION have been met
- c. the dangers of repression;

1.4 Three processes of transformation were suggested:

- a. the UDF is transformed as its grows, campaigns advance and sectors broadens
- b. the creation of a structured MDM formation
- c. broadening and transformation to a PATRIOTIC FRONT.

### 2. THE ROLE OF THE UDF

2.1 The UDF shall not play the role of the political vanguard – this is now the role of the ANC;

2.2 The UDF should perform the following tasks:

- a. coordination of activities of mass formations / sectors
- b. facilitate the building of ANC and SACP structures
- c. strengthening and building the sectoral formations
- d. conducting campaigns in consultation with the ANC.

### 3. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UDF AND THE ANC

3.1 Building ANC branches:

- a. all UDF structures should actively [participate] in the building of branches
- b. intensify propaganda on ANC
- c. street committees to act as sites of recruitment for ANC
- d. all mass formations to engage in a door-to-door education campaign on policies, etc of the ANC

### 3.2 Consultation and Co-operation

There must be careful consultation and close cooperation between the UDF and the ANC on the following matters:

- a. the choice of regional and local convenors of the ANC
- b. where UDF activists are given responsibilities in ANC structures, they should where possible retain UDF positions. If this is not possible the UDF region / affiliate may appoint / elect an alternate
- c. programmes for sectors by the ANC should be formulated in consultation with the sector concerned.

## 4. JOINT STRUCTURES

4.1 Joint structures of the UDF, ANC, Cosatu and SACP should be formed at national, regional and local level.

4.2 These structures will facilitate:

- a. consultation
- b. joint planning
- c. coordination of activities among these structures.

4.3 The ideas of "LOCALS" at an area level where all sectors are represented was also suggested.

## 5. MASS FORMATIONS

5.1 A number of questions arose in relation to the position of mass formations:

- a. how is a mass organisation \ formation defined?
- b. what then is a political formation? The difference?
- c. do the current mass formations have a mass constituency on the ground.

5.2 The role of mass formations in the democratic South Africa must be discussed.

5.3 The relationship between the "Political sections" of a sectors (eg ANC Womens League) and the mass formation (eg FEDTRAW) requires clarification.

[NOTE: The UDF was subsequently dissolved on 20 August 1991.

Its youth & women's wings became the ANCYL and ANCWL.

Student affiliates became separate organizations.

Religious affiliates could not have party political affiliation in a multi-party democracy, and they retained their independence.]

## DISCUSSION PAPER ON DEVELOPING AN ANC STRATEGY FOR WORK IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is intended to lay the basis for a discussion between the internal national leadership of the ANC and representatives of the National Co-ordinating Committee (NCC) of the UDF white affiliates. The ideas contained in the paper reflect the thinking of the NCC and the white affiliates.

The paper and the discussion are concerned with the question of developing an ANC strategy for work in the white community. We do not intend to be prescriptive but rather to raise some proposals for discussion.

### 2. AN ASSESSMENT OF THE WORK OF THE WHITE AFFILIATES

The aims and objectives of the white affiliates have until now included the following:

- a) to win support away from the National Party;
- b) to bring the message of the MDM to the white community and to win support for MDM policy;
- c) to take issues and concerns in the white community into the MDM;
- d) to provide a home for white democrats and involve them in UDF forums, strategizing and campaigns; and
- e) to build non-racialism.

The strategy employed by the white affiliates in pursuit of these aims has been two-fold:

- i) to work directly in the white community and in the UDF; and
- ii) to participate in the formation and activities of middle ground organisations (eg Five Freedoms Forum) and alliances (eg End Conscription Campaign and the Open City initiatives).

In addition, individual white activists have worked in more "establishment" orientated organisations (eg IDASA, Consultative Business Movement and Centre for Policy Studies).

#### Assessment of work

The successes and achievements of the white affiliates include:

- a) keeping alive and justifying the Congress tradition of non-racialism;
- b) providing a political home for a small number of white democrats and involving them in UDF activities;
- c) contributing to the campaigns of the UDF;

- d) participating in the formation of middle-ground organisations and alliances; and
- e) exerting some influence over the white community (and in particular over key sectors such as business, the DP and the churches), primarily through middle-ground groupings.

At the same time, there have been a number of failures and limitations:

- a) the white affiliates have not built mass support or a mass organisational base;
- b) they have not provided a political home for all white democrats;
- c) they have failed to develop a programmatic approach to white area work and to exert sustained influence over time; and
- d) they have failed to make white area work the responsibility of the MDM as a whole and not simply that of the white affiliates.

The reasons for these failures and limitations relate to:

- a) the image of the white affiliates as “young, overly-serious leftists”;
- b) the criminalisation of the UDF and the repression under the State of Emergency;
- c) the absence of a coherent UDF strategy for work in the white community and, at certain times and in certain regions, hostility to this work;
- d) the fact that the white affiliates are “white” organisations;
- e) the fact that they have had to act as surrogates for the MDM; and
- f) the fact that their activists are not rooted in the communities they are trying to address.

In summary, the white affiliates have had some success in involving whites in UDF activities but have not had any significant direct impact on the white community. This impact has largely happened through the involvement of the affiliates and individual activists in middle ground organisations.

We believe that there exists enormous untapped potential for the ANC to influence and win over whites.

With a few exceptions, the white affiliates will dissolve when then ANC branches are formed.

### 3. ANC STRATEGY FOR WORK IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY

#### Motivation

We believe that neither the ANC nor the MDM has a comprehensive and sophisticated strategy for work in the white community. The development of such a strategy is vital for two reasons:

- a) the white community is not just “another constituency”. It constitutes the ruling group, it holds power, and it is a significant obstacle to the realisation of a non-racial and democratic society;

b) with the disbanding of the white affiliates when ANC branches are formed, there is the danger that white area work will be completely neglected.

### Strategy

An ANC strategy for the white community must differentiate between constituencies within that community. There are four broad constituencies, defined in terms of their political affiliation, each of which requires a different objective and approach:

i) There are those people who support or potentially support the ANC.

These people must be actively encouraged to join ANC branches and must be properly integrated into them.

ii) There are those people who would not join the ANC but are sympathetic or at least receptive to it (eg many supporters of the DP).

The ANC must engage these people, seek to win them over, broaden their numbers and work in alliance with their organisations.

iii) There are those who support the NP.

The ANC must seek to ease their fears and neutralise their arguments, reconcile them to the inevitable changes that will occur in the future, and engage in local level discussions with them.

iv) There are those who support the right-wing.

It is unclear what effective approach the ANC can take in relation to these people. The ANC should at least offer to talk to them so as to seize the moral initiative and maintain the moral high ground in relation to right-wing violence and racism.

In addition to these constituencies, the ANC strategy needs to distinguish between, and address differently, the different sectors and institutions in the white community \*eg business, the churches, the DP etc). The ANC needs to develop clear policy on which groups it will work in alliance with (eg the DP on local government/'one city' initiatives).

In addressing the white community, the ANC should appreciate that its ,major concerns revolve around:

- i) violence (and in particular that occurring in Natal);
- ii) the economy (and in particular the question of nationalisation); and
- iii) the question of group rights.

[We are not saying that the white community should be pandered to. The ANC will quite frequently experience conflicting demands from the white and black communities that cannot be reconciled.]



## Development and implementation of strategy

In order to develop a sophisticated strategy for the white community, we are recommending that the ANC establish regional “white community task groups”. These groups would include one regional executive member with this as a portfolio, and a range of ANC activists with different organisational experience and access.

It is vital that the composition of the groups be non-racial and not limited to white activists.

The groups could periodically draw into discussions non-ANC people who have an “expert feel” for the white community (eg people from CBM, IDASA, the universities etc).

The role of the groups would be three-fold:

- a) to analyse the white community and develop ANC strategy for work in this community in an on-going-way;
- b) to develop ways of implementing this strategy; and
- c) to act as a resource pool for the ANC national leadership.

In addition, we feel that such a group should be established at a national level as well. This group would be responsible for co-ordinating the thinking and activities of the regional groups.

## 4. ANC CALL TO WHITES

We are requesting the ANC to issue a special call to whites. The purpose of the call would be twofold:

- 1) to contribute to the on-going process of lessening white fears and, if possible, winning their understanding of and support for the policies of the ANC; and
- 2) to encourage whites to join ANC branches.

The content of the call should include the following:

- 1) a restatement of the ANC’s long standing commitment to non-racialism, in terms of both its composition as an organisation and its vision for a future democratic society;
- 2) a plea for reconciliation;
- 3) a specific appeal for whites to join ANC branches; and
- 4) a restatement of the ANC’s commitment to peace and to negotiations.

The question of how the call is drawn up needs to be discussed.

Creative and dynamic ways of introducing and promoting the call need to be considered so that it receives maximum publicity. The call could then be widely distributed in the form of a glossy pamphlet, accompanied by the Constitutional Guidelines ( and possibly a paraphrasing of the Harare Declaration).

Since ANC branches are already in the process of being set up, the call needs to be issued as soon as possible.

## SOURCES

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#### 1.2 General Council & other minutes

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