

## The Durban Moment

A very personal reflection

### 1. What I recall of these heady times

My Durban Moment included the final years of my high school career, and four years at university. This 'moment' was broken by a year away in Southern California as a high school exchange student on the American Field Service programme. Here are some random reflections.

#### On the death of Albert Luthuli

I was editor of the school newsletter at my government school in the working class suburb of the Bluff. The newsletter (called the Sower) was produced for the school by the Young Christian Students Organisation (YCS) at the school. YCS was an international Catholic young Organisation, an off shoot of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) movement started by Cardinal Cardijn in Belgium. The National Chaplain was Father Albert. Both YCW and YCS drew members from all race groups. They also placed a special emphasis on issues relating to social justice. The YCS branch at my school was the only branch (at least in Natal) operating at a government school.

The editorial was innocuous (I think I have a copy somewhere). It mourned the death, in what then seemed mysterious circumstances, of a clearly great South Africa. It noted his Nobel Peace Prize and Luthuli's deep commitment to non-violence.

Within weeks of its publication (at least as I recall) this obituary in a school newsletter (ruined by production) brought a visit from school inspectors and a demand to rename the youth movement SCA, both Anglican and I presume unracial. An embarrassed headmaster asked us to comply. We did.

One year later I attended the unveiling of the tombstone for Luthuli in Groutville. I was glad we had written the obituary.

#### The Stevedores strike of 1971

All I really recall of this strike was the dismissal of around one thousand stevedores, and a newspaper report saying that the train taking them 'home' to Zululand had crossed with a train bringing replacement workers. This was exactly the power equation that was beginning to change in the mid 1970's.

#### 1973 strikes

My most vivid memory of these strikes is watching a march of municipal refuse collectors down what was then Smith Street. Perhaps a couple of thousand. They marched through the centre of town like they owned the place. Indeed for those hours they did. Something had changed.

#### Student activities

Here there is a montage of memories, not necessarily in neat chronological order. The SASO bannings; the NUSAS bannings; Niel Agget's death in detention; the death in

detention of Achmed Timol; the St George's Cathedral 'massacre'. The frustration of Durban students when the police would not confront them. Student sit-ins and teach-ins. Mike Kirkwood and Tony Morphet. Rick Turner mentoring students one by one from his car parked on the public road, (King George V Avenue) so evading his banning order. Harriet Bolton teaching Halton Cheadle and Charles Nupen and A Ed Erwin about Wage Order hearings at Bolton Hall. Student anger at our turncoat University Principal, Owen Horwood (B.Com, second class, part time). The 1970 Parliamentary election. Still one lonely Progressive Party MP, and the humiliating defeat of Jan Steytler in the Musgrave Constituency, and Ray Swart in the Berea Constituency, where our university was located. And the enforcement of uniraical membership of the Progressive Party and its youth wing in terms of the Political Impropriety Act (these names). Parting company both physically and strategically with newly made black and Indian friends. The long (? Six weeks) midday picket protest outside the Cenotaph, in which Catholic Archbishop Hurler and Methodist President Alec Boraine protested, as Special Branch officers took photographs from their conveniently located offices.

Off to Joburg for my first job

I recruited myself to work for Alec Boraine, recently hired by Anglo's Harry Oppenheimer to be the company's first Employment Practices Consultant. My job to look at management responses to the renaissance of black unions. The tedium of corporate life compensated by now being in the same town as my then girlfriend, now wife, Gillian Hall. Then back to Durban to learn about the Frame strikes in Hammarsdale, the formulate a rule that where a new workforce required three weeks or more of training management was more likely to negotiate than fire.

2. What did we hope for then?

Of course there was never an easy "we". Because of my involvement in Progressive Party politics, and my liberal beliefs there was for me always tension with the 'hard left'. Yet I suspect all of us were riven by mainly tactical and strategic differences. So often quick to judge and much less quick to act.

Yet we did have perhaps more than we then realized in common. A deep revulsion for the entire Apartheid/ race hegemony project. A deep hatred of our deeply authoritarian state. (I recall watching the movie about Greece under the Generals (Z) with a deep sense of empathy. The sense of dread when returning to South Africa. suspicion of spies. A retreat into language seeking to escape the harsh realities of our times into much more optimistic social theory.

And we certainly wanted an end to white minority rule. We wanted real non-racial democracy. The whites amongst us struggled to escape (perhaps sometimes protesting a little too much) the white ghetto Apartheid South Africa firmly held us in. For many there was the challenge (but perhaps also excitement) of clandestine activities. For all a fear of police, detention, interrogation. For the white males the moral nightmare of military service.

So again: full democracy. Freedom and justice. An economic order which favored the poor and broke white monopolies on economic power. Decent work for all. Decent housing for all. Decent healthcare for all. Decent education for all.

3. And now, some 40 years later, how much of this has been achieved?

This is not an easy question to answer with any integrity

The glass half full

First: the miracle transition

Though not a day went by when I did not wish for an end to the Apartheid nightmare; yet there were very few days when I believed the end, and especially a relatively peaceful end was possible. The astonishing speech, Mandela's release, the roller coaster Codesa talks, and then the magic days of long, happy and in at least some places multi-racial voting queues. How many human beings throughout history have had these privileged experiences.

And a country much, much, much better than it was

Not just white racism banished from at least our formal institutions of power: but a progressive constitution, with great values and many powerful institutions to make these values real.

As I walk around the neighborhood in which I have lived for 40 years I am still stunned at the transformation. Then each time I saw a black toddler I wondered how close he or she was to the two year limit, at which point she would be banished to a black 'place'. Now the government primary school, built exclusively for working class and mainly Afrikaans speaking whites is full to the brim with only young black children. And the pool at the recreation centers welcomes children of all races. And the clinic serves the entire spectrum of our population.

And our universities boast one of the highest 'first in family' college student ratios in the world.

And our country has taken its rightful place on our continent, and indeed 'punches above its weight' in global forums such as the G20, Davos, BRICSA and the like.

And the glass half empty

Of course the paradise we imagined all those years ago is not fully established. The men waiting for a day's casual employment at many Joburg intersections remind you that there is not decent work for all. The beggars at every intersection make visible a poverty both extreme and extensive. Race divides in both worldview and behavior so evident on radio talk shows and in the social media are a grim reminder that non-racial Nirvana has not arrived. So too is the continuing victim language of many black South Africans.

And both our national discourse and the 'reality television' of our daily life indicate that a race based divided society has been neatly and sometimes discreetly replaced by perhaps less evident but perhaps also equally vicious class barriers. A new multi-racial elite is found at the shopping centers, fancy restaurants and clubs and the convention centers and hotels of Sandton. In Joubert Park the old white poverty of the 1970's has been replaced by urban squalor more reminiscent of Lagos than anything from South Africa's past.

And that Golim of Afrikaner Nationalist "fist power" - that Matrix like world of the Special Branch, informer, inner circle of power and wealth at the centre of Afrikaner Nationalism has been replaced but the scourge of corruption: deeply non-racial, created by both white fear and creed the echo of a race based past is met by an echo of an elite happy to use a race based currency to both enrich themselves, and also isolate themselves from the harsh realities of both our broader society and indeed the broader world.

4. So what should we be hoping for now ?

27 years ago the American sociologist Peter Berger and I wrote these words: " What South Africa faces is neither paradise nor apocalypse, but rather a slow and painful march to modernity." I think we were more right than I wanted to believe either then or now.

The first transition is not over. As Obama quoted in his first campaign the past is not history, indeed the past is not even past. No generation has a guarantee that the end of an evil regime will produce something better. The South Africa that has succeeded Apartheid is a much, much, much better society. But it is not yet the shining city that we in our youth, all those years ago, hoped to build. Very useful foundations have been laid. But much work lies ahead. Both for those of us who aspire to be patriots, as well as for those generations who succeed us.