

## **Ruth First Memorial Lecture 2011 – Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe**

Program Director;  
Chancellor Dikgang Moseneke;  
The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Loyiso Nongxa;  
Director of the Wits School of journalism, Professor Anton Harber;  
Members of the Ruth First Committee;  
The Community of the University of Witwatersrand;  
The family of the late Anton Hammerl;  
Stalwart of our struggle, Mr Ahmed Kathrada;  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am humbled by your invitation to join the list of luminaries who have delivered the Ruth First memorial Lecture before me.

I also wish to thank the Wits School of Journalism for creating this public platform, so that our nation can continue to have a free interchange of different views and draw lessons from our past to chart a way forward.

Before proceeding, I would like to acknowledge the presence of the family of the late South African photographer, Mr Anton Hammerl. It is probably ironic that Ruth First, the person whose life we are honouring tonight, wrote about the Libyan Revolution and its possible pitfalls! Then, 29 years after her murder at the hands of an illegitimate regime, a South African journalist (Hammerl) is killed in the “Second Revolution” in Libya.

Ruth First was such a remarkable human being who made a lasting impression in almost all areas in which she immersed herself.

Such was her commitment to and level of brilliance in her work that I dare say it will take volumes to capture her life and its meaning for us today.

Because the present is but the synthesis of the contradictory forces of the past, learning to reflect on our past helps inoculate us, as far as possible, from the malady of repeating past follies.

So it is all the more advisable to pay heed to the generation that shaped the character and value system of the struggle for justice based on morally commendable claims as we build a people-centred democracy. There could be no sufficient understanding of modern day South Africa and hence the future we are constructing if such understanding does not proceed from the historical consciousness set off by earlier generations.

In this connection, a peek into Ruth First’s biography affords us an opportunity to grasp the permissive conditions from which she emerged to become a titan of our struggle for justice and democracy.

Ruth First was a communist born to communist parents. Her parents were Marxists who became active in the formation and life of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), later the South African Communist Party (SACP).

Continuing with the family tradition, Ruth First joined the CPSA, which was beginning to forge tentative but steady ties with the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, the African People's Organisation and the trade unions. This turn of events signalled the beginning of the CPSA's long and tested commitment to the fight against national oppression.

So, at an earlier stage in her life as a young white South African woman, Ruth First would have developed a clear if nascent conception of the race/class nexus in the developing South African capitalism. Her grasp of national oppression would have been enhanced by her own family background. Her parents had come from Eastern Europe, a region reeling under the noxious conditions of religious and ethnic persecutions.

This made it possible for Ruth First to develop a heightened sense of justice. Her developing moral universe was thus based on the concerns of international solidarity and exalted humanism. In consequence, coming from an activist family predisposed her to cultivate a sophisticated understanding of the historical process as it unfolded in South Africa, manifested in this symbiotic relationship between race and class.

It is worth remembering that like all key leaders within the Congress Alliance, Ruth First's thought processes occurred within the ideological parameters of her political home, the SACP. She was first and foremost a communist who saw, read, and comprehended external reality in Marxist categories.

Be that as it may, being part of a collective did not mean forgoing her individuality; at any rate, her rugged, independent intellectualism could not countenance the culture of conformism and parrotry.

This made it possible for Ruth First to flourish as a thinker, a researcher, a writer and an activist, contributing to the intellectual growth of the organisations she served, just as these organisations created the social milieu propitious for her development. This and other exceptional qualities that Ruth First possessed should inspire us to take a leaf from her copybook today.

Program Director

For the purpose of focusing our discussion I would like to direct us to the question: what is the meaning of Ruth First's thoughts in post-apartheid South Africa and post-colonial Africa?

I hope this way of framing the focus of this address will help us identify some of the lessons we can learn from her life with the view to advancing her vision in the present tense.

Since Ruth First's life was versatile, I will therefore attempt to identify at least three areas which seem relevant to her contribution.

These are:

- Post-apartheid democracy;
- Journalism and Academic work; and
- Internationalism.

Program Director,

In whatever we do, our strategic goal as a nation is the building of a united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist, just and prosperous society. This is no mere rhetoric. This vision galvanised the life of Ruth First and her contemporaries in the struggle. It remains the political framework guiding all our efforts in post-apartheid South Africa.

In keeping with this vision, post-apartheid South Africa has brought about meaningful changes in the lives of many South Africans who had been previously excluded from the benefits of the South African nation-state. While the many difficulties we still confront cannot be underplayed, there is universal acknowledgement that South Africa today is better than it was before 1994.

Such is the importance of the relationship between the quality of life and democracy that if we fail the first time in this regard there is virtually no chance of recovery. Without palpable, material changes in the everyday lives of the people, democracy is reduced to a pro-forma status. In substance, we cannot claim to be free when we are only enjoying freedom to vote but not freedom from poverty or the freedom to educate our children and to also extend effective health services to our families; in sum, to create a better life for all South Africans.

A passing glance at history shows that conditions of socio-economic stagnation breed social malaise and discontent. In itself, poverty is antithetical to social cohesion and has the propensity to tear the social fabric apart, creating feelings of insecurity and marginalisation, especially among national groups and the poorest of the poor.

Scarcity of resources leads to social fissures based on a subjective understanding of social conditions, in turn impacting negatively on the process of mobilising our people behind a common vision of equality and justice. As a result, a nation with such a brittle historical identity as South Africa can ill-afford to neglect growing the economy to address the basic needs of its people while working to deepen common national consciousness.

Conditions of want in societies with a history of fragile social relations are bound to undermine the process of social cohesion, which is often manifested in perceptions of racism, feelings of group marginalisation and pronounced ethnic consciousness. Our case in South Africa is not made any easier by the fact that we

are still nursing wounds from the past as a people. As you know it is easier for wounds to hurt than to heal.

In this regard, and given our aforementioned strategic goal, I am disposed to admit that government could have used national symbols more effectively than it has been doing till now in weaving this fabric of social cohesion. At a symbolic level, the enthusiasm with which the people of a country accept and react to national symbols constitutes a useful barometer of how united a country is in its diversity. Going by the experience of the last 17 years, one would be hard put concluding that at this level we have hit the mark.

Nevertheless, even though a room for improvement still exists, from its side, government remains amenable to partnerships that seek to assist in building a united country driven by the values of solidarity and progressive humanism; a society with a clear understanding of the history that has shaped its present character.

And yet if unity of our people is pivotal, the pestilence of corruption menacing the soul of our democracy is a life and death matter on which our future depends. I would contend that after racism, corruption is the second most serious malady staring humanity in the face today. Corruption is cancerous; it eats away at the vitals of society, since it ultimately chokes off key societal institutions.

With this concern in mind government has over time put together a battery of anti-corruption systems. However, in the end it is up to individual members of society occupying positions of trust to heed their conscience. No matter how effective the laws of the land are the fight against corruption boils down to the individual's sense of right and wrong.

It follows that we need a conscious intervention at the level of education to enable our nation to appreciate the devastation corruption is causing in the long term. We may need to begin exploring creative ways of introducing subjects related to ethics into our school curriculum very early in the development of the learner.

In the end corruption is not a matter of government alone; it concerns all of us, since it affects society at large. It takes political leaders, the media, business leaders, civil society, public intellectuals, academics and communities to identify the root causes of corruption and to mount a sustained struggle to liquidate it from society's system of thought.

Once again we know that during her lifetime, Ruth First fired consistent broadsides at all defaulters on principles. We know that she rejected the creeping Stalinism of the 20th century with the same determination that she castigated corrupt, autocratic post-colonial African states. Her forthrightness, eloquence and ability to research issues of social concern with the object of identifying appropriate remedial action would have made a notable difference to

the quality of our public discourse on challenges such as the insidious culture of corruption.

Program Director,

Ruth First spent her life fighting censorship. She had envisaged a South Africa where freedom of expression was as essential as the air we breathe. Today's democratic South Africa stands as a monument to her quest for this noble goal. Accordingly we must commit never to betray these ideals, now or in the future.

South Africa is a constitutional democracy, based on the principle of separation of powers. As you know, the principle of separation of powers means that the legislators make the laws which the executive implements and the courts interpret. As a constitutional democracy, South Africa has as one of its pillars the principle of judicial review.

All her life Ruth First steadfastly held on to the notion that the people are the prime movers of history and therefore believed in their ability to change their own conditions.

So she clearly understood that people are not just passive recipients. She viewed organisations, institutions, leadership and publications as raising agents and not a substitute for the people in the course of the struggle.

Therefore she played the role of an organiser in the media context, using media space to empower ordinary people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In addition to her journalistic prowess Ruth First is also known for her exceptional academic work. She was an engaged, empirical and activist intellectual both as a journalist and as an academic. Opposed to ivory tower academia, she carried out research with the intention of making a difference in the lives of the people.

Her conception of the role of a university in society leaves us today with some notable tasks. An obvious one among these is the dire need for the African university to be at the heart of African development by leading the charge in the continental efforts to seek African solutions to African problems, while contributing to new forms of knowledge systems. That is the legacy that Ruth First has bequeathed to us and posterity.

Her academic and journalistic endeavours reflected her political orientation. A prolific writer, some of her works include:

- 117 Days-an account of her imprisonment in South Africa;
- South West Africa – a study of colonial oppression by Germany and South Africa;
- The Barrel of the Gun – a study of military rule and political power in Africa;

- Libya – a profile of colonel Gaddafi and his objectives;
- Black Gold, the Mozambican miner – a study of the lives of Mozambican migrant labourers in South Africa.

In addition she assisted with other works, such as Kenyan leader Oginga Odinga's Not Yet Uhuru, Nelson Mandela's No Easy Walk to Freedom, Govan Mbeki's Peasant Revolt and also co-authored South African Connection and Olive Schreiner.

Beyond being an academic Ruth First was also a teacher, she dedicated part of her life to teaching so as to empower others.

As her colleague at Eduardo Mondlane University Bridgette O' Laughlin said in testimony at the TRC:

"In Mozambique (they) started work at seven thirty, Ruth was religious, she got into that car at seven thirty she was at the centre.... She didn't have much time... Occasionally (they) went to the beach...She wrote the Olive Schreiner book, she wrote most of Black Gold, she learnt Portuguese and did lectures in Portuguese, prepared teaching....she continued to say that besides this she had little time for anything else."

Again we are inclined to use Ruth First's labour of love approach to teaching and her other qualities not only as a way of benchmarking our teachers today but also, as a source of inspiration. We need the selflessness and commitment of Ruth First in putting the interests of our country before anything else. We continue to remind our teachers that they are expected to be in class, on time, everyday, teaching at least seven hours a day.

Inversely, Ruth First and her generation epitomised the ideal teacher; self-motivated and always eager to impart knowledge or to help learners find knowledge themselves.

She valued the inherently transformative impact of education on human development and growth. Similarly, education will play a catalytic role in changing the lives of ordinary South Africans if all of us join hands and launch ourselves into the task of educating society. In this task, one expects our teacher unions to take the lead, equally inspired by these ideals.

Strengthening democracy presupposes an informed citizenry with the ability to make sense of their world, to penetrate the interplay of political dynamics and be able to understand the democratic process and their place in it. We know by now that freedom, human rights, democracy and development are better guaranteed in an educated society.

We should remember that at the time she was killed, the most potent weapon in Ruth First's armoury was ideas and her urge to use them so that they bear on social life. As it later turned out, Ruth First's death was a cold, calculated murder

motivated by the perceived effects of her thoughts on intellectual and political centres in Southern Africa.

As her husband and comrade, Joe Slovo, said: they knew that the whole thrust of her teaching tended to counter some creeping illusions and wishful thinking about PW Botha; that he might be ready to retreat from the essence of apartheid towards a policy of true reform....' He goes on to say 'And Ruth was not working in an ivory-tower; the students at the Centre were cadres from the Party and the government, and the dynamism and vigour at the Centre were beginning to influence researchers and scholars from other institutions of learning in Southern Africa.'

Those who work with ideas today face a similarly weighty task of helping bring about positive changes in the lives of people through the medium of a pen. It remains an indictment of historical proportions that despite our democratic space today our public discourse is still bedevilled by the poverty of ideas. Again I think Ruth First would have had a few choice words for this situation.

Program Director,

In substance, South Africa's foreign policy today is not inconsistent with the internationalism of Ruth First. Although the changing geo-political make-up of the world has imposed certain imperatives both on our country and our continent since Ruth First's demise, the character of our foreign policy remains consistent with the progressive vision of the world that Ruth First heartily embraced.

In this regard, the preface of the White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy, entitled 'Building a Better World', The Philosophy of Ubuntu, says: 'This philosophy translates into an approach to international relations that respects all nations, peoples, and cultures. It recognises that it is in our national interest to promote and support the positive development of others. Similarly, national security would therefore depend on the centrality of human security as a universal goal, based on the principle of Batho Pele (putting people first). In the modern world of globalisation, a constant element is and has to be our common humanity. We therefore champion collaboration, cooperation and building partnerships over conflict.

This recognition of our interconnectedness and interdependency, and the infusion of Ubuntu into the South African identity, shapes our foreign policy.

South Africa therefore accords central importance to our immediate African neighbourhood and continent; working with countries of the South to address shared challenges of underdevelopment; promoting global equity and social justice; working with countries of the North to develop a true and effective partnership for a better world; and doing our part to strengthen the multilateral system'.

In addition to this humanism, we are also driven by the reality that South Africa cannot make headway in terms of development surrounded by conditions of under-development, which, as it turns out, constitute a dead weight on the development of the whole region.

We should also emphasise that South Africa's foreign policy is not a government possession; it is a policy for all South Africans. What follows from this view is that, as Ruth First did, South Africans of different backgrounds have to interact with the rest of our region on business and social levels.

The free movement of people, goods and services in our region is the goal we want to see achieved, because at the end, a strong regional economy will provide us with the opportunity to attract much needed direct foreign investment so that ultimately we are able to improve the quality of our people's lives.

On the international front, much still needs to be done in terms of transforming the institutions of global governance. The recent examples of Libya and Côte d'Ivoire point to challenges of unequal global power relations and how the developed North continues to ignore the yearnings of the rest of humanity in the developing South, with impunity.

Notwithstanding this scarred global political landscape, we will, together with the nations of the South, and using such vehicles as BRICS, continue to press for reform of the global institutions of governance and raise up the voice of the downtrodden South, and in this way strive to achieve an equal, peaceful and better world that Ruth First envisaged.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On a different note, history has taught us that even the most glorious liberation forces are no exception to what in most former liberation movements across the world have come to be known as 'the sins of incumbency'.

It is easier to mobilise the masses of oppressed people behind a common vision than to hold them to higher ethical standards once the goal has been reached. This is a challenge that has faced all post-colonial societies over the years.

The humanist vision that held us together under the rubric of social justice can very easily deteriorate into individualism, greed and selfishness that go against the grain of our ideals as a people.

Ruth First saw this deformity of principle playing itself out in some post-colonial nations on the African continent and spoke out against it with a rare clarity of mind.

But she also understood that the creation of national states on the African continent was an outside imposition often not reflective of local realities. Present day African states did not evolve as socio-historical entities defined by internally coherent subjective consciousness.



Unlike European nation states, they were designed from outside to suit external interests. In Africa ethnic communities were separated by this contrived political process, leading up to unmanageable post-colonial socio-political difficulties.

Post-colonial Africa suffered this congenital affliction, which, in turn, shaped the nature of African political relations. The notion of a one party state is an offshoot of this reality. In many cases the political leadership took the decision to impose a one-party state with the stated aim of managing the complex poly-ethnic dynamics.

As you know a one party state has a limited life-span, invariably marked by civil wars, revolutions or other forms of social upheavals. The situation in Libya and many other African countries today typifies this history.

This is a perspective that is often ignored outside the academic environment in trying to make sense of modern day Africa and its unique difficulties.

In conclusion, I am convinced that this legacy that Ruth First has left us, is imperishable. It also throws up a number of lessons.

First, the killing of Ruth First was 'an act of ultimate censorship', to cite the memorable words of Ronald Segal. And yet ideas do not cease to exist just because their thinker is no more. In fact ideas attuned to the needs of the age tend to assume a life of their own.

Ruth First's ideas are immortal because they come out of and speak to the human condition. Her empirical orientation meant that she would focus her research on the material conditions of the oppressed. We recall here her investigation into Namibian conditions (then South West Africa), the series of reports exposing these conditions to international and national readers which galvanised international pressure on South Africa to give up its control of Namibia. All along she was doing all this work in service of a vision, which ultimately materialised when Namibia attained freedom as a sovereign state.

The life of Ruth First reminds one of the words of Che Guevara, the South American revolutionary, that 'if you tremble with indignation at every injustice, you are a comrade of mine'. Not only did Ruth First quake with anger at the injustices visited on fellow humanity, she made an effort to change them.

Secondly, our social background should not prevent us from criticising others with the aim to correct or build.

Her social provenance as a white woman on a continent under European colonialism did not limit nor inhibit her desire to speak her mind, all along bolstered by the primacy of principle.

She would not be silenced, and for that earned the respect of all her comrades, including those from African nations to which she had made a contribution.

Thirdly, basic humanistic precepts should prevail on us to volitionally acknowledge that colonialism and apartheid have wrought damage to our nation at all levels.

If we accept the history of our present conditions we may be well-disposed to accept that some conscious action is needed to undo the damage we have suffered. More than anything admitting to mistakes of the past promotes a climate of reconciliation and helps us move on.

Fourthly, no government is perfect; mistakes will always happen. Accepting criticism and conceding to our errors without imputing evil motives to those committed South Africans who point out our mistakes with the best interests of our nation at heart should be as normal as voting for any party we choose.

Lastly, if we are to make anything at all from the life of Ruth First, and if we are to learn lessons that can serve our current needs, we need to learn to appreciate her in totality, the inter-connection between her politics, her activism as well as her journalism and academic orientation.

After all it was this unique combination that equipped her with the strategic orientation that enabled her to better appreciate the particulars and universals of human experience, and to act accordingly.

As the American Civil Rights leader and the universal icon of freedom, Dr Martin Luther King, would say, '...when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of nobodiness – then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait'! None of our people should be expected to wait.

I thank you