

Ruth First Lecture by Pallo Jordan (28 August 2000)

The Ruth First Memorial lecture does not mark a happy occasion. In fact it marks a murder. The death of the comrade whom we are honouring this evening was the result of a vile deed. An act of violence that is but a link in a long chain of repression that commences with the illegalisation of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1950, the illegalisation of the ANC and the PAC in 1960 and the so-called Political Interference Act of 1968. The torture and murder of political prisoners in detention, leading inexorably to the formal repression through state-employed murder squads and “unofficial” death squads, were all expressions of the same brutal response. There was an diabolic consistency to the logic of Verwoerd and his successors. As demonstrated by these and their subsequent actions, they hoped to banish from the South African political landscape the real alternative to apartheid by statutorily defining any efforts to recast South Africa along non-racial lines as seditious.

Verwoerd’s successors made a further attempt to crush that alternative by statute and imprisonment in October 1977 when they banned the 17 organisations, “The World,” shortly after murdering Steve Biko.

These acts of repression testify to the desperation of the apartheid regime, which, thirty two years after banning the CPSA, found it necessary to take the killing fields from the streets of Soweto and other townships into the capitals of the region.

The full weight of the blow struck against us when the apartheid regime ordered the assassination of Ruth First is felt at moments like the present. Her incisive, analytical mind would have greatly enriched the national debate both inside and outside the liberation movement and helped to define the way forward. Comrade Ruth First was outstanding because she had taken to heart Marx’s eleventh Theses of Feuerbach:

“Philosophers have only described the world in different ways, the point however is to change it!”

She was a militant South African democrat and a Communist who became one of the foremost campaigners for the independence of Namibia, both here at home, and during her years in exile. As an internationalist, she was also deeply involved in the liberation struggles of other African countries, especially the former Portuguese colonies, Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau. It was these qualities that made the comrade whose murder we are marking today so formidable an opponent of the apartheid regime.

Ruth First was among that generation of liberation movement militants who occupied the frontline trenches in the fight for freedom after the Second World War. She was one of a talented corps of men and women, nationalists and Marxists, who initiated virtually all the major decisions that shaped the destiny of the liberation movement, and consequently our country. Their political baptism was the 1946 African Mineworkers strike. They were prominent in the

Passive Resistance Campaign of 1946-47. It was they who led the Defiance Campaign of 1952. It was they who led the campaign for the Congress of the People in 1955. It was they again who took the decision to launch the armed struggle in 1961.

Her primary sphere of activity was journalism. She served as the Johannesburg editor of "The Clarion," "Advance," "New Age" and the "Spark," weekly newspapers that were successively banned by the apartheid regime. She also served as editor of "Fighting Talk," the monthly magazine founded by the Springbok Legion, a non-racial ex-serviceman's organisation. When she went into exile in Britain, after her release from prison in 1964, she briefly ran South African News Features, then entered academia. Her academic work was always informed by her extensive journalistic experience, but its quality was enriched rather than impaired, by her insistence on empirical evidence to substantiate theoretical propositions.

Ruth First was murdered before she could savour the victory she had worked for all her adult life.

The Cold War and the Corruptions of Stalinism.

Ruth First's entry into politics virtually coincides with the commencement of the Cold War. At either end of that great geo-political divide, critical Communists, like Comrade Ruth First, often suffered opprobrium. While she refused to conceal, cover up and concoct alibis for the crimes and horrors of Stalinism, she adamantly would not embrace the even more bloody system of late monopoly capitalism. Ruth First opposed the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 with the same vigour that she denounced the US war on the people of Vietnam. While she could never be an apologist for the absurd policies pursued by Gomulka and Gierak in Poland, she lent her unflinching solidarity to the British labour movement facing the onslaught of Thatcherism. For her pains, until quite late in her academic career, she was debarred from the US on the grounds that she was a Communist. And, when the Mozambican Union of Journalists proposed that she be posthumously awarded the Julius Fucik Medal for journalism, their proposal was vociferously shot down by the Union of Soviet Journalists, taking their cue from the leadership of the CPSU.

Despite the terrible reverses, disappointments and broken promises associated with the name of socialism during the 20th century, Comrade Ruth First never wavered in her commitment to socialism as an honourable cause and as a realisable goal. Hers was a commitment not rooted in a complacent and dissembling acceptance that everything from Moscow was gospel; or that pretended that all was truth and light in East Berlin; or that everything that came from Beijing was immersed in incense. Hers was a truly revolutionary commitment in that her solidarity with the socialist countries was always critical. Like the Karl Marx, from whom she drew her inspiration, she firmly adhered to his favorite adage:

"Doubt and question everything"

She was, consequently, not afraid to confront the fact that the real-politik socialist countries, including the Soviet Union and China, were compelled to practise, would regularly conflict with the demands of the class and national struggles. But she recognised that it was infantile not to have anticipated these, and churlish not to have accommodated some of them.

Many negative lessons can be drawn from the collapse of the post-capitalist societies of the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe. Like the defeats suffered by revolutionary socialism in Europe on the eve of World War II, the collapse of the Soviet Union has handed one victory after another to the most reactionary elements of monopoly capital. It has, for the time being, also disarmed the working class in the core countries of world capitalism. No amount of sophistry can disguise that this was a major defeat whose ravages it will take years to repair.

The Vision of a Just Society.

Though the 19th century had witnessed the steady incorporation of Africans into the colonial capitalist economy, it was as a result of mining that the overwhelming majority of the African population were drawn into the modern economy for the first time.

The Anglo-Boer War has been characterised as a revolution from outside and from above. Those who subscribe to this view assign to British imperialism the historically progressive role of transforming South Africa from a geographical to a political expression. Yet at the time, J. A. Hobson, the author of "Imperialism," expressed the view that it was a war waged . . . to place a small international oligarchy of mine-owners and speculators in power at Pretoria" and to "secure a full, cheap, regular submissive supply of Kaffir and white labour. "

There is clear evidence that the war was waged, in part, also to pre-empt the emergence of a non-dependent South African capitalism. To quote Simons and Simons, in "Class and Colour in South Africa":

"Few agrarian societies were so richly endowed or well equipped as the Transvaal for an industrial revolution. The republic attracted educated and professional men from Holland or the Cape, and was beginning to produce its own specialists. Left to itself, it would have developed an efficient administration, a network of railways and roads, and adequate supplies of water and power. "

The preceding power balance in South Africa had been the outcome of armed conflicts, compromises, relations of clientage and alliances. The destruction of Afrikaaner independence and the peace negotiated at Vereeniging opened up new options. The cobbling together of the Colonialism of a Special Type (CST) that became the *modus dominandi* of capitalism in South Africa was equally the result of new compromises, the redefinition of old, and the creation of new alliances. The 1905 Native Laws Commission placed the stamp of permanence on these new arrangements by defining Black South Africans,

especially the Africans, as a conquered, subject people who would in future have no voice in the manner in which they were governed.

But, perhaps most importantly the Anglo-Boer war resulted in the emergence of a common society, in which Whites and Blacks no longer lived in parallel, mutually dependent, but separate societies.

As they were forced to turn away from the familiar symbolic universe of the family, the clan and the ethnic group, the most advanced elements among the Black intelligentsia adopted the more inclusive concepts of the nation, the African continent, and that continent as part of an international community. They also embraced as worthy compatriots others drawn from the most recent immigrant communities from Europe and Asia, who identified with Africa's struggles and the aspirations of her people.

But theirs would be an Odyssey characterised by an agonising existential dilemma: either to confidently confront the uncertainties of progress and the future, or cling to the dubious comfort of a disintegrating past. African writers, poets and leaders of thought experienced the modern era as highly ambiguous, combining extremely destructive aspects with constructive elements. Their dilemma was brilliantly captured in the epic Samuel Mqhayi composed to honour the Prince of Wales (later the Duke of Windsor) when he visited South Africa.

Mqhayi personifies modernity as Britain herself, of whom he then says:

Ah, Britain! Ah Great Britain! Great Britain on which the sun never sets! She hath conquered the oceans and laid them low; She hath drained the little rivers and lapped them dry; She hath swept away little nations and wiped them away; And today she lusts even for the open skies. She sent us the preacher; she sent us the bottle; She sent us the Bible, and barrels of brandy; She sent us the breechloader, she sent us cannon; O, Roaring Britain! Which shall we embrace? You sent us truth, yet denied us the truth; You sent us ubuntu, yet took away our ubuntu; You sent us light, yet we sit in darkness, Shivering and benighted in the bright noonday sun! Nay, this mighty Britain is confusing the peoples; Harsh, hard and cold is she, even unto her womb, What then shall we say of her offspring?! And, worse yet, what can be said of her father!

These excruciating ambiguities of modern times grew as urbanisation accelerated. In their distress, many intellectuals were tempted to lend an ear to the siren songs of a backward-looking nativism, which its adherents frequently presented as "authenticity." The colonial intelligentsia in Africa as well as Asia often portrayed the dilemma posed by modernity as tragic. The national liberation movement's response was that rather than wallowing in their alienation or seeking refuge in the past, the intellectuals should reintegrate themselves with the common people by active engagement in the political and social struggles for freedom, independence and progress.

The most progressive among the Black intelligentsia consequently evolved an inclusive vision of South Africa, embodied in Rev. Z. R Mahabane's invocation of: "The common fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of man." From its inception African nationalism in South Africa has preferred inclusivity to ethnicity, and has eschewed racism and tribal particularism. The non-racial national ethos, expressed in the preamble of the Freedom Charter as "South Africa belongs to all who live in it. ..." is the legacy they left us.

In 1924 the left-wing of the then pre-dominantly White labour movement, organised as the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), were the first among Whites to accept the notion of a non-racial society. Liberals among the dominant capitalist classes began to see it as the inevitable result of the changes wrought by World War II. White liberalism made its last ambivalent attempt to force this recognition on the rest of White South Africa through the 1946 (Fagan) Commission on Native Laws. The fate of Fagan's recommendations testify to the option the majority of White South Africans chose: excluding Blacks from common citizenship.

Colonialism of a Special Type (CST) thus carried within it two contradictory tendencies "" the one, segregationist ; the other a countervailing, integrationist thrust. But the empirical fact of institutionalised racism rested like a dark shadow on the consciousness of all South Africans, in instances shaping it to a greater degree than objective socio-economic forces.

Ingredients of the Liberation Alliance.

Marxism requires us to interrogate Marxism's interface with nationalism and to view both nationalism and Marxism as a part of history while we remain alert to their central mission: the reshaping of history.

Though the mission it sets itself is usually progressive, nationalist ideology invariably draws its strength from the past. Marxists regard that as one of the inner contradictions of nationalism. It is however a contradiction inherent in the capitalist mode of production itself. The internationalisation of the capitalist mode of production brought a world market into being, engendering in its wake nationalist responses that may at first appear inherently opposed to capitalism itself. Anti-imperialist movements consequently reflect a rather peculiar historic irony. While anti-imperialist movements were born to resist the transformation of capitalism's periphery by its core, they could only do so successfully by themselves undergoing transformation. The most radical among these movements were not those that strove to restore a pre-colonial golden age, but rather those that had come to terms with the consequences of imperialism, and sought to go well beyond it. In other words, the anti-imperialist struggle is itself a dialectical process. The two poles involved in it continuously modify each other.

Marxism, on the other hand, is unashamedly modernist. It designates the modern proletariat as the key revolutionary agency precisely because the demands and rhythms of capital accumulation require that the proletariat constantly change and adapt itself to technological, cultural and social

progress. At the rock face of the capitalist economy, as it were, the proletariat like the productive forces it operates is subjected to a never-ending process of renewal, improvement and refinement. This cycle of continuity and discontinuity is both a burden and an opportunity. No sooner has the working class experienced the destruction of pre-capitalist modes of existence with the construction of the capitalist mode of production, than it has to pass through the mill of the de- construction of early capitalism and the construction of late capitalism. Conservatism, of any sort, is consequently alien to the existential situation of the proletariat and can only impair its potential.

South African Marxists have consequently never wrung their hands at the effects industrialization had on pre-capitalist African societies, preferring to accept these because their transformative impact are a necessary baptism to equip the proletariat to assume its historic tasks.

But the birth of a proletariat was itself an extremely painful, bloody process. On the continent, the South African experience was unique only in its extent and societal depth.

The Dialectics of National and Class Struggle.

The assassin's hand that reached out from the terrible night of apartheid to snatch away the life of our comrade, hoped by doing so to snuff out a vision. The vision Ruth's murderers hoped to extinguish had been born of a specific moment in South Africa's transformation from a pre-colonial to a colonial society:

As Simons and Simons remind us in their magnum opus, "Class and Colour in South Africa," hard on the heels of the diamond discoveries,

"British and colonial troops made war on the Hlubi in 1873, the Gcaleka and the Pedi in 1877, the Ngqika, Thembu Mpondo, Griqua and baRolong in 1878, the Zulu in 1879, the Sotho in 1880, the Ndebele in 1893 and the Afrikaaner republics in 1899. The Cape absorbed the Transkei and its peoples in 1879-94. Britain annexed Basutoland in 1868, Griqualand West in 1871, the South African Republic in 1877, Zululand in 1887, Matabeleland in 1894 and the Afrikaaner republics in 1900. ... South Africa's industrial era was baptized in blood and the subjugation of small nations. As from the beginning of the century, the liberation movement took the form of struggles between classes and national communities." (p. 31)

The history of the national liberation movement is in the main the complex inter-penetration of national and class struggles. That is the explanation for the enduring alliance between the ANC and the Communist Party, and not some sinister, dark conspiracies hatched in Moscow (or Yeoville) as McCarthyists of various stripes have claimed. From very early in their respective histories, the Communist Party and the ANC shared common objectives. In time this matured into a political alliance, with a common approach to their immediate and intermediate goals. The most visible line of fracture in White-ruled South Africa was race. Power, status, access to wealth

and opportunity were apportioned by reference to race. No less important, but perhaps less obvious, was class which intersected and coincided with race in a number of instances. Nationalism proceeded from an uncomplicated unity of “the people” vs the oppressor/racist regime. Marxism, on the other hand, had to be more sensitive to the real diversity of “the people” and could ill afford to lose sight of the contradictions among the “people.” Marxist intellectuals devoted their energies to unpacking the salience of class to the struggle, even as the struggle ensued. Their most important contribution was investigating the symbiotic relationship between racial oppression and capitalist exploitation.

Ruth First was firmly located within the Marxist tradition, and it is that tradition I shall be addressing.

Marxism neither dismisses nor sanctions the divergence of theory from practice. Karl Marx regarded theory and practice as discontinuous. That is: Theory, though different from practice, is not absolutely distinct from it. Theory takes leave of existing practice: i. e. society as it exists; so as to return to it. The struggle to transform the existing society requires an endeavour to comprehend it through theory, so as to lay bare the living relations that undergird it. Theory will thus inform and guide revolutionary practice. In Marx’s 11th Theses on Feuerbach, I would underscore the “only” in order to highlight its latter portion, “... the point however is to change it!”

That implies that the kernel of Marxist political practice ought to be the building of political alliances, on the basis of a realistic and concrete analysis of the existing or the potential balance of political and social forces, with the aim of creating a political majority that supports socialist transformation.

In pursuance of that aim, South African Marxists, with a few notable exceptions, have placed great reliance on an alliance with African nationalism. The theoretical practice of those Marxists who stood outside the national movement, while very learned, tended to be politically irrelevant and divorced from practice.

Ruth First understood the challenge as: evolving a revolutionary practice, rooted in Marxism, that is at once intellectually rigorous and politically engaged. Anchoring herself in both, the Rosa Luxemburg of “Social Reform or Revolution” had written, “. . . on its road to development the Social Democratic movement must successfully negotiate a course between two reefs: abandonment of its mass character or abandonment of the final aim; falling into bourgeois reformism or into sectarianism. “

The danger of Marxists isolating themselves on the left margins of society remains very real even today. While sound theoretical practice cannot guarantee success, its principal object has to be striking a balance between these two.

South African Marxists have wrestled with that riddle since 1921. Reams of paper have been invested in debating the relationship, if any, between racism

and capitalism: to assess which is the determinant and which the dominant contradiction in South African capitalism. There were those who argued that the national and class dimensions were inseparable, and that neither should be stressed at the expense of the other, race and class must be read together. Such a theoretical departure would have had the most profound implications had it been adopted by the liberation movement. Ruth First was among those who contended that racism was relatively autonomous within capitalist relations of production. That approach implied the possibility of intervention through broad-based alliances, around democratic principles, while nonetheless linking the struggle against racism to the struggle for socialism.

[It is, parenthetically, rather amusing to note how these initial Marxist analyses have been rehashed and recycled by subsequent generations of activists. By those who claimed to be “Trotskyists” and by those mis-named “Workerists” during the 1980s.]

Comrade Ruth First was among the few members of the South African Communist Party prepared to admit that her party had not always had an adequate appreciation of the dialectics of race, class and gender. She was ashamed that the youthful Communist Party of South Africa had been unable to define an honourable role for itself during the 1922 Rand Revolt. Though she understood why its leaders were very hesitant about allying themselves to the ANC during the late 1920s, she felt embarrassed that even on the eve of its illegalisation, the CPSA still misunderstood the militant nationalism of the ANC Youth League. Ruth readily admitted that she, herself, was a late bloomer when it came to issues of gender. These are some of the reasons why, unlike many of her comrades in the party, she would not dismiss out of hand the work of younger analysts associated with the new left.

Ruth First's intellectual activity, both as an editor and as an academic compelled her to confront such issues. When she helped edit Oginga Odinga's study of post-colonial Kenya, “Not Yet Uhuru,” she had to contend with the reality that the Kenyan liberation movement had in many respects failed the people who had brought it to power. To her dismay, she also discovered that Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, the doyen of the independence struggle and a liberation fighter who had for decades been considered a man of the left, had become the leader of a rapacious indigenous elite, bent on savouring the fruits of freedom on their own, to the exclusion of the mass of the peasantry who had struggled and died for it.

Contradictions Among the People.

It is self-evidently true that the national democratic alliance consists of and contains within itself real and actual contradictions. Marxist dialectics instructs us that the contradictions among the people are not constant. Like all phenomena they are subject to change, mutation and transformation.

Being catapulted into modern times created new options for all within our society at large, adding new facets to old identities while defining new ones.

But the past, unlike the rubble from a derelict building on a construction site, cannot just be carted away for disposal as waste. Entire communities, groups, and individuals have internalised aspects of the past as defining their identities. Yet others, in order to cope with the complexities and trauma associated with rapid change and transformation, tend to cling on to the past, or rather what they perceive to be the past, for security.

This accounts for the tenacity with which some sectors of our society, especially among the African people, hang on to institutions, traditions and practices whose relevance to life in the 21st century may strike one as marginal.

Gender is probably the oldest and most enduring contradiction that bedevils our lives. Even as we speak anachronistic traditions and customary laws regularly undermine the guarantees of legal equality in our Constitution. For the majority of South African women the reality, regrettably, still is inequality in the home and the community. These are not issues that we will resolve by denial. They have to be squarely confronted and receive priority in our national agenda. While the considerations I have mentioned counsel due care and sensitivity, can we afford to allow the dead weight of tradition to thwart the aspirations of more than half of our people?

The de-racialisation of property-ownership has always been integral to the liberation struggle. One dimension of the struggle, after all, entailed creating opportunities for men and women of colour to rise as high as their talents can take them. Representatives of every stratum and class among the Black population probably contributed to the multi-class character of the liberation movement. Yet it would be correct to say that historically the movement received far greater support from certain classes than from others. Since the 1940s, it was specifically the African working class of town and country who were the movement's main base of support. Historically the movement employed the classic weapon of working class struggle – the general strike – as its principal method of non-violent struggle. The relative weight of the working class and other working people among the oppressed is also reflected in the Freedom Charter's unambiguous tilt in favour of their aspirations.

Despite the momentous political changes South Africa has witnessed, in general terms, the property-owning classes in South Africa are White, while the propertyless, the wage earning classes and the poor are overwhelmingly Black. The distribution of life chances and skills is similarly skewed. We cannot exclude Blacks from becoming and being capitalists, any more than we can bar them from becoming lawyers, doctors, accountants, engineers, skilled workers, etc.

The opportunities that arrived with democracy can also give rise to tensions. These will not disappear because of a blind insistence that there is no conflict potential between the director of a corporation and the workers employed by it, merely because both are Black.

But the multi-class bloc, moulded to wage the liberation struggle, remains essential for the transformation process. This implies engagement with the emergent Black bourgeoisie rather than leaving them to their own devices. Or worse yet, the devices of others. Such engagement could involve the elaboration of standards of conduct and a business ethic that will speed job creation, the fostering of skills development, the empowerment of women, the strengthening of the popular organs of civil society, and active involvement in the fight to end poverty.

This Black bourgeoisie should also be encouraged to cultivate within their own enterprises and in those where they hold executive positions, the creative management of the conflict potential of industrial relations. Rather than merely pursuing money and hefty profits, the Black bourgeoisie should give the lead within the business community regarding responsible corporate behaviour.

We must accept that there will be instances when the imperatives of service delivery to the working people collide with the claims of one or other section of the working class. But, entrenching the rights of workers must remain central to our ambitious programme of transformation. Efforts to deepen and extend those rights might even conflict with the larger national project of creating a stable economic environment. Taking the easy option of condemning the unionised workers, or alternately, edging towards confrontation with the ANC and the government might make good media headlines, but neither path actually takes matters forward. If the contradictions referred to are grounded in objective reality, the principal issue is devising a sound strategy for their management.

There is also an unfortunate ethos of entitlement that appears to have taken root among sections of our population, manifesting itself in a refusal to assume responsibility for services or otherwise contribute to the upkeep and maintenance of the very cities and towns we waged struggle to liberate. This is, regrettably, matched by a culture of indifference towards the needs of the people among many charged with precisely that responsibility. While no one wishes to abridge the rights of teachers and public servants to defend their living standards and fight for improvements, aren't there equally important issues "" such as Batho Pele, an ethic of Serving the People "" that our Public Service unions should be focussing on? At a time when we are all committed to restoring a culture of teaching and learning, is a work stoppage the most creative response that Black teachers can muster to an industrial dispute?

There are other contradictions, that one could touch on in passing. Language: The constitution guarantees the equality of our eleven official languages. But in reality English has become the dominant language in the economy and in politics. That situation is the result of the unequal distribution of the instruments and means of cultural production. But, can we afford to leave this matter unaddressed? Are there no creative initiatives to be taken to achieve actual equality?

Resources are unevenly distributed among the regions, so that provinces like Gauteng, the Western Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal stand a better chance of

improving the lives of their inhabitants. Does this not pose the danger that in addition to being racialised, poverty could also become regionalised, provoking unexpected tensions within our society?

In allying themselves to the national movement, Marxists hazarded the risk of being reduced to subordinate allies, or allies of convenience, to be dispensed with once the nationalists had attained their objectives. 20th century history offers numerous such terrifying examples. The inordinate fear of antagonising nationalist leaders, sometimes expressed by Communists, is informed by such experiences. But, deliberately muting the class dimensions of the national liberation struggle, as a tactic to nurse this relationship, does not, however, tame the worst impulses of the conservatives.

In Ruth First's intellectual work, both as a journalist and an academic she boldly confronted these issues. Her study of coups in Africa, "The Barrel of a Gun", portrayed old elites, the emergent propertied classes, and the wabenzis, wishing to loot the state's coffers in order to acquire property, emboldened by such tactics, while the ordinary working people were reduced to passivity or disoriented.

The question to my mind should be: what strategy should the Marxist left devise to sustain the unity of the liberation alliance while not suppressing or repressing the actual contradictions within it? Defending and fostering the long-standing ANC traditions of open and vigorous debate, while ensuring unity in action, surely must be a dimension of such a strategy.

The Transition.

By 1988 it was clear that the White electorate would not follow the NP government to the bitter-end. February 2nd, 1990 was not merely an admission that the repression had failed to crush the alternative, it was an acknowledgment that the alternative had acquired a grip on the imagination of the majority of South Africans and was being given serious consideration by the intellectuals on whom the regime had formerly relied.

Once the legal political space was opened, the different elements of the liberation movement and anti-apartheid opposition came forward and filled it, pegging out their respective constituencies.

But not all the strands in the anti-apartheid opposition had responded to the 30 years of repression with the same degree of resilience.

By 1994 the radical liberalism, personified by the likes of Patrick Duncan, Joe Nkatlo, Randolph Vigne, Jordan Ngubane and Eddie Daniels, that had become dominant in the Liberal Party after 1959, had disappeared from the political landscape. Its place had been taken by a rather pale version, the Democratic Party. While Duncan, Vigne, Brown and others had attempted to root liberalism among the Black majority by building alliances with African nationalism (especially the PAC leadership), the Progressive Party (and its progeny) had chosen to trim their sails to options acceptable to the White

electorate. They resurrected Rhodes' bankrupt policy of " a vote for all civilized men." The party that by default became the surviving flagship of liberalism was, regrettably, to the right of centre and firmly locked into White electoral politics.

Those who see the "ironic victory of liberalism "in South Africa's democratic constitution could well be mis-reading the situation.

By locking itself within the White laager, what remained of liberalism drifted so far to the right, that today the NNP itself feels comfortable under its rubric! The real ironic victory might well be that though the NP lost the political argument, it managed to distort, if not destroy, the soul of liberalism !!

By the time of the 1999 elections, a new consensus had become dominant. Its bottom line is democracy, which reduced the White far-right to a marginal political force, isolated on the outer fringes of South African politics. The arrival of democracy had wrought impressive changes. Essential elements of which include :

- ending the colonial status of Blacks "" African, Coloured and Indian;
- ending the second class status of the Hinduism, Islam and other non-Christian religions;
- the emancipation of Gays and lesbians;
- affirmation of the diversity of South African society;
- and, though we still have a long way to go, setting in motion the emancipation of women.

Democracy also meant that henceforth violence could no longer be a legitimate political instrument. Its eschewal by all parties also signifies acceptance by all of the desirability of stability as the guarantor of our democratic freedoms and as a pre-requisite for economic growth and development.

Peace, stability and security, in the region in general, and in South Africa in particular, are especially important to partisans of the left. It is by growing our economy that we will lay the material basis for the social upliftment of the working people. And, it is by deepening and firming up our democracy that we will secure the gains the working people have made since 1994.

Developing countries have opted for diverse paths to attain political stability and peace. Historical experience has taught us to jettison earlier romantic notions about colonial nationalism and to recognise that nationalist mobilization is determined by the actual form and content and the class nature of the affected societies.

Once freedom/independence had been attained, nationalism proved inadequate to sustain the cohesion it had earlier created. Palpable social stratification, evident in the real experience of ordinary people, poses a problem that nationalist ideology cannot resolve. As a result, in many of the societies that are held up as examples we should emulate, nationalist leaders

have chosen repressive, authoritarian methods to purchase the stability so necessary for development. In South Africa, however, the consensus expressed in our Constitution is that we value democracy as much as development, and will not trade the one to attain the other.

Political pluralism, the option chosen by our people, underscores the importance of a continuing political dialogue amongst all parties and an ongoing search for consensus. But it also implies the submission of the minority to the majority view. The very fluidity and flexibility of the system however has yet another implication: that today's minority could well be tomorrow's majority, and vice versa.

Conclusion.

Our nation building project is the outcome of a struggle between two major role players, with divergent political agendas. From their divergent standpoints, at a decisive moment during the 1980s, both sides recognised that negotiation was the preferable option. Forging a single South African nation on the basis of democratic institutions could, however, only be realised by politically defeating the institutions of apartheid and demonstrating the inadequacy of the political programmes proffered by smaller parties.

It is common cause that the negotiated settlement arrived at in Kempton Park was the outcome of a strategic intervention by the national democratic alliance, led by the ANC. That intervention moved political discourse in and about South Africa onto a fundamentally new terrain. Public discourse that had formerly centred on reforming and recasting apartheid in various ways, shifted decisively to the abolition of apartheid and the establishment of true democracy.

On April 27th 1994 the democratic movement won the argument. That victory was further consolidated in June 1999.

The national liberation movement, in all its organised formations, won because it had galvanised an otherwise diverse population, to struggle for freedom and democracy in the first instance. Reconstruction and development, in order to improve the quality of life of our people, is now its rallying call. That must necessarily entail rapid economic growth. It is with respect to the latter, that I want to pose a challenge for the Marxist left.

Marx and Engels described the leadership of the left as

“... having over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions and ultimate general result of the proletarian movement. “

Uprooting the legacy of national oppression and delivering on the promise of liberation has not been easy. But there is a slowly emerging consensus that the eradication of poverty should be the priority item on our national agenda. In such an environment, is the left not obliged to make a strategic intervention

in order to shift the terrain of the national debate to the issue redistribution? A creative response to the challenges of today, I submit, would be for the left to elaborate a realistic development model, rather than pointing accusatory fingers at the shortcomings of GEAR. Such a model may well entail re-thinking a number of time-worn assumptions. That will require courage.

Courage is one quality the South African left has always possessed in great abundance.