

STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL 8.30PM - 19 JULY, 1991

**BEYOND THE STEREOTYPE -
THE SACP IN THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE
University of Western Cape Conference to
Mark the 70th Anniversary of the SACP
Joe Slovo**

In ten days time our Party celebrates its 70th anniversary. Three score years and ten is the biblical allotment of human lifespan. And those on the other side of our political divide would very much like us to fulfil the biblical prophecy so that we can meet our maker at the earliest.

But they will be disappointed. We are here to stay. They failed to strangle us at birth. They failed to wipe us out by 40 years of illegality. They were forced to unban us coupled with the hope that the Eastern European events would lead to our demise. But we are stronger than we have ever been and we remain confident that they will fail to negate our role both now and in the future.

Wherein lies our strength? We have a vision of society whose time will undoubtedly come; a socialist society in which one person does not live off the labour of another. And that time will come not because our Party exists but because our working people - the most wretched of our society - will in the end ensure the creation of both a political and economic democracy in our country. That is the essence of what we stand for.

There is no political party which has so openly and rigorously addressed its past as we have done. And in major respects we did so long before the Gorbachev revolution. This capacity to learn from the past is one of our greatest strengths as we move into the future.

But all this does not absolve us from addressing those who remain sceptical because of certain aspects of our past. There are certainly some rather murky skeletons in our historical cupboard. We are confident, however, that when you put our whole record into the

historical balance you will unravel the mystery as to why uniquely, in contrast to the slide elsewhere, our Party has maintained and even increased its popularity.

It is against this background that I proceed to touch on some of the negative and positive features of our 70 years of history.

We were born in the white workers labour movement and this reflected itself in questionable policies in the very early stages, an example of which was the 1922 white miners strike.

We went through a period during which we absorbed what was described as "Leninism" without realising that much of it was wrapping paper for Stalinism. Lenin was undoubtedly the greatest revolutionary this century. He used Marxism as it should be used, as a tool to deal with the concrete reality of his country. But many of Lenin's propositions which referred to special moments in the history of a specific struggle were perpetuated to serve the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The leading role of a communist party was encoded in the law and the constitution giving it the right to lead and rule in perpetuity. It was a party which was, at the end of the day, ^{was} not even answerable to the class it claimed to represent. Democratic centralism was denuded of its democratic content and became centralism, pure and simple. The relationship between the party and social organisations was degraded; they became little more than transmission belts for party policy. The single party state came to be accepted as a permanent feature of society and not as a passing historic phase. A style of ideological polemic emerged which prohibited any questioning of the wisdom of the leading organ and ~~which~~ was absolutely dismissive of all contrary views.

We cannot deny that these distortions, which came to be rationalised as a legitimate part of revolutionary Marxism in most parts of the world, also impinged themselves on our own practice. It led to a degree of intolerance, exclusiveness and elitism. Our external policies were dominated by blind adherence to the decisions of the Soviet Communist Party; a practice which took root during the period when all affiliates of the CPSU dominated Comintern were

obliged to follow its decisions.

Some of our negative practices were imposed upon us by the framework in which we were forced to operate. For example, during the 40 years of illegality we could not engage in complete inner-party democracy. I stress this point because it is precisely during such periods when unavoidable practices imposed by the situation are entrenched and become habits; they tend to continue unless the greatest vigilance is exercised when the situation changes.

But with regard to most of these negative tendencies in the international communist movement, our Party, to its credit, consciously moved towards some of the key foundations of perestroika long before it was initiated by Gorbachev in the Soviet Union.

As far back as 1970 we rejected the Stalinist concept of a party which has a monopoly of wisdom and a natural and exclusive right to lead its constituency. We emphasised then that our claim to lead the workers must be earned and re-earned through democratic, open political contest.

This fresh approach to the concept of vanguard led in a straight line to our policy of multi-party democracy and a rejection of the single party state of self-perpetuating power with all its implications for corruption and dictatorship. This commitment found expression in our latest programme adopted before the East European collapse.

Nowhere was our departure from Stalinism more evident than in our theory and practice, of at least 50 years standing, of how a communist party should relate to other social and political organisations.

We ceased long ago to treat other organisations as mere conduit pipes or transmission belts for our policy. And this, by the way, unravels another secret; our long-standing alliance with the ANC to which I will return.

At the theoretical level, using Marxism as a tool and not as a catechism, our Party developed its truly indigenous theory of the

South African revolution based on its conception of colonialism of a special type. This analysis led to our commitment to the national democratic transformation of our country as a stage towards socialism. It also informed our definition of who the main enemy is, which are the main forces for change and the multi-class character of the immediate struggle. For us, the question was not whether we were engaged in class or national struggle. What we did was to address the class content of the national struggle and the national content of the class struggle in our specific conditions. Another important contribution was to spread the concept of true liberation as going beyond the political and embracing also economic democracy.

It should not be forgotten that this ideological contribution impacted itself on a very real way on the whole national and democratic movement. It helped to transform the ANC from its early beginnings of petition politics into a revolutionary nationalist movement.

Translated into revolutionary practice, our theoretical concepts had far-reaching implications. Among the most important of these implications was the Party's commitment to help build a powerful African National Congress as head of the whole national democratic struggle. It led also to the creation of a long-standing alliance between the Party and the ANC based on complete respect for each others independence and inner-democracy.

As an independent Party we can truly claim to be the pioneers of some of the key democratic aspirations which are today taken for granted by the vast majority of South Africa's people. We are the undisputed pioneers of genuine non-racial political organisation. This was as far back as the middle 20s when our Party broke with its origins in the white labour movement. We were pioneers too of a vision of a non-racial democracy. As far back as 1929 - even before the ANC - we put forward the demand for majority rule. No one can dispute that for the last 70 years, when black trade unions were regarded as treasonable conspiracies, our Party and its members trudged the length and breadth of our country, laying the historical foundations for the powerful trade union movement which has now emerged.

As I have said our internationalism embraced a rather mechanical adherence to Soviet foreign policy. But internally our commitment to internationalism always put us in the front rank of the struggle against racism, tribalism, narrow chauvinism and regionalism. By and large communists played a seminal role in combatting these tendencies. When the time came for armed combat as part of the political struggle our Party, together with the ANC, created Umkhonto we Sizwe, and the names of hundreds of communists are inscribed on the roll of honour of those who died, who were wounded and were imprisoned during the armed struggle.

In the late 1980s, when the whole movement was called upon to address the question of the transformation in more concrete terms, our Party played no small part. We helped articulate the basis for a post-apartheid society, including principles of multi-party democracy and a mixed economy.

So much for the past. What of the present?

Our Party is busy examining the impact of the changes that have taken place on some of our basic ideological concepts. It is for example clear that the thesis of colonialism of a special type needs to be looked at. It was based on the reality that despite 1910 the status of blacks as a colonial people was perpetuated. Even though inherited national domination remains a fact of life, does the concept still hold in the same way in the light of the rapid political transformations which we are going through? Perhaps the time has come for more emphasis to be placed on the class content of the continuous quest for national liberation. Whatever conclusions we reach it is imperative that the multi-class approach in regard to the main forces for change remains in place. Precisely because this is so the existence of the Party and the trade union movement, as independent forces and as part of the alliance, has become more vital than ever. It is more imperative that working class aspirations do not end up at the bottom of the pile in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Another problem with which we are grappling is to define more precisely the role of the Party as an independent force in the light of the broad consensus which exists within the liberation alliance on the character of post apartheid South Africa and the strategy and tactics required to get there. We are also embarked

upon an internal discussion on the relationship between the post-apartheid economy and our ultimate vision of a socialist South Africa. We are confident that at our forthcoming congress in December these issues will find more definitive answers. What I am attempting to emphasise is the open-minded way in which our Party is ready to examine its policies in the light of the emerging new realities.

There is currently an unprecedented offensive against the Party and its role in the tripartite alliance. It is alleged that we have the ANC in our pockets. The ultra-left, by the way, attack us for being in the pockets of the ANC. The recent ANC conference resulted in renewed media speculation about communists in the ANC and their role.

It is universally accepted that the elections at this conference were the most democratic this country has yet seen. Yet the innuendo is spread that the reason for the election of a large number of communists to the NEC is that we organised a caucus. If this were so, is it conceivable that our highly professional investigative press could not produce a shred of evidence from at least one of the 2,000 delegates that they received an instruction from the Party leadership on the voting. Even more sinister in some of the comments on the conference is the implication that if a democratic election produces a result which those who have power do not like, they will use that power to subvert the democratic process.

So, if democracy has had its day in a most fulsome measure, what else is the complaint?

There is mealy-mouthed concern that, because of its alliance with our Party, the ANC is risking some support from whites, Indians, Coloureds and the international community. The answer to this is in the finding of the recent Markinor Gallup-related poll, which showed 68% support, plus a possible 15% for the ANC. Presumably, those who gave the thumbs-up to the ANC did so in full knowledge of the alliance, despite 40 years of an unending flow of poisonous propaganda while the Party was banned. The attack on the Party and the Alliance is really an attack on those objectives of the ANC, which are regarded as a threat to accumulated privilege, and the Party is falsely seen as the sole initiator of such policies. Together with violence, the attack on the Party and the Alliance is part

of the major offensive against the ANC itself, and should be recognised as such by all democrats.

^{We accept that}
~~Even~~ if a percentage of whites, Indians and Coloureds have reservations about aspects of policy which they consider to be Party influenced, this concern has to be addressed. We proudly plead guilty to having played a part in influencing the ANC in its stand for the poor and its bias in favour of the black working people. Our detractors live in the hope that a break with the SACP will reverse this emphasis. There may be similar reservations among a section of the better-off blacks about other aspects of ANC aspirations. But the test of a policy is whether it is right and adheres to principle and not whether it panders to prejudice or to vested interests. What gives politics a bad name is the concept of canvassing support opportunistically and the buying of votes through unprincipled electioneering.

But I do concede that we are called upon to grasp a real nettle and that is the interweaving of membership (especially at leadership level) between two independent political formations. This was graphically put by President De Klerk when he expressed his discomfort at the thought of getting into a scrum with a scrambled egg. The mind of course boggles at the additional thought that President De Klerk's own pack would clearly be a farmer's breakfast of the National Party and the Broederbond. But rugby aside, I believe we are called upon to address the concerns about this type of relationship for a number of reasons.

In the first place, it is an unusual relationship. But it has its roots in our concrete conditions. Our history has been interwoven by more than 40 years of illegal conditions. There are indeed few people in the ANC, if any, who do not see those years of alliance and the participation of communists in the ANC as extremely fruitful and in the interests of the ANC and the liberation struggle in general.

In the second place, on the face of it, there are undoubtedly risks of a double discipline. Fear is expressed about who, at the end of the day, determines ANC policy. The answer lies not in theory, but in the style which has been elaborated over the years of the way communists have played their role at all levels in the ANC, including at leadership level. Those who have had this

experience - including non-communists like Chief Luthuli, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela and others - are aware that the strength of the alliance lies in the fact that communists in the ANC have always totally subjected themselves to ANC discipline and authority, the inner-democracy of the ANC and have never worked as an organised faction.

Following in the footsteps of Moses Kotane, the Party leadership has on no occasion instructed Party members to adopt specific positions on any aspect of ANC policy. All members of the Party argue their points of view without any form of mandate. Those ^{non-communists} who sit at these meetings frequently observe known leaders of the Party adopting completely contrary positions on some very fundamental issues. This in our view is a sign of the healthy and vigorous debate we encourage when trying to find solutions to the difficult problems facing us. If the Party has any position to put to the ANC, it does so as a Party on a formal basis when the two leaderships meet in the alliance collectives. The Party leadership did not, for example, have a single discussion on the issues which would arise at the last ANC conference either in respect of policy or voting.

So, if you have nothing to hide (we are told,) why don't you at least provide a full list of those of your members who occupy influential positions in the ANC and other democratic organisations?

Those who unceasingly beat this drum accompany it with the refrain that the SACP is now legal and should no longer fear complete exposure of its membership. But we all know that the same refrain was heard unceasingly during our long period of illegality and there is no doubt that the motivation behind the refrain was precisely the same; to use the participation of communists as a stick with which to beat both the ANC and the Party.

It is a matter of historic record that prior to our banning in 1950 there was not a single secret communist. For 40 years we were forced to work in the cellars. We were selected as the key targets of slander and repression. We were attacked by the very same people for working in the shadows.

Be that as it may, we are now grappling with a transition period with its new demands. We are leading up to our first legal congress in 40

years in December of this year; a congress which will elect a new leadership and adopt a new programme and constitution. And I for one am committed to the proposition that from that point onwards there will be no secret party members. Those who have socialist commitments but who, whether for personal or political reasons, cannot fit into this new phase should have our respect even though they ~~are~~ ^{may} not ^{be} our members.

There are those, many of whom are motivated by sincere inquiries, who pose the following question: since there is broad agreement between the ANC and the SACP on the shape of a post-apartheid South Africa and also on how to get there, why does the SACP not just fold up and leave it to the ANC?

Our answer is clear. We have no double agenda. As a Party we do not hide our socialist objectives. It is our duty to spread the message of an ultimate socialist society now. In this respect we differ from the ANC even though the differences are non-antagonistic. In addition, it should be remembered that the Alliance between the two organisations is based not merely on immediate political consensus but has its roots in the inter-class nature of the current struggle. It is the task of ~~an~~ ^{our} independent Party to ensure that in this inter-class lineup of forces, working class interests are not swamped, that the working class is organised as a powerful constituency and that the choices which are being debated for future development will be made in a way that will not prejudice the working class whom we claim to represent.

All this calls for a strong, healthy, independent trade union movement and a political party of the working class such as ours.

If and when elections come, we as a Party will certainly participate. Whether we do so has part of an existing alliance, or a broader patriotic front, or a coalition or on a completely independent platform, depends on ~~too~~ many variables, including the specifics of a future electoral system. The alliance between the SACP and the ANC is, we are convinced, ~~is~~ more solid than it has ever been. But an alliance is not like a Catholic marriage, and the way it will operate in future conditions is a matter which will only be fruitfully addressed when those conditions emerge.

Finally, let me reiterate our complete confidence that ultimately South