

100 YEARS OF THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

The lavish celebrations in Mangaung this past weekend, among other things, reminded me of the late Van Zyl Slabbert. Renowned for his ready wit and as a master of repartee, he once quipped in response to a question about the likelihood of a one-party state in the new SA, given the dominance of the ANC, that we were already living in such a state because “it`s just one big party”!

But, jokes aside, on the occasion of the centenary celebration of the founding of the ANC, I, together with many others, I am sure, expected some attempt at a serious stocktaking and historical analysis of both the achievements and the current, indeed continuing, dilemmas faced by the ruling party. This was, it seems to me, the best possible moment for an excursion into the philosophy of history, for the leadership of the party to use the platform to explain in the simplest possible terms to its followers and to all the people of South Africa why some of the roadblocks in the way of attaining the long awaited transformation of the country appear to be irremovable. Although such an attempt may still be forthcoming, I doubt very much whether the policy conference to be held in June will get beyond the sound and fury that has come to characterise recent gatherings of that kind.

Not quite by coincidence, I have in recent days been re-reading certain chapters in the massive volume published by Donald Sassoon in 1996, which he called *One Hundred Years of Socialism. The West European Left in the Twentieth Century*. It quite explicitly does not deal with the history of ideas of socialism or with the many selfless leaders and activists who tried to sustain or renew the values and the ethos on which the socialist ideal is founded. Instead, “[...] (it) is a comparative history of socialist *parties* in the context of the constraints they faced: capitalist development, the nation- state, the international system, dominant ideologies, the past. [...]”. Although Sassoon`s work is a descriptive, even empiricist, account of the history of West European socialist, mainly social democratic and communist, parties especially since 1945, I am quite sure that the ideologues and the theoreticians of the ANC and of other left-leaning groups could do worse than to (re-)read the first 100 pages or so of Sassoon`s account of the twists and turns of socialist orientated parties which were thrust into office unprepared. There, they will find that the script they are acting out was written long ago and that they are faced with well-nigh insoluble dilemmas and contradictions, given their point of departure.

Because of spatial constraints, I shall focus on only three of many relevant issues. The first of these is the fact that the history of the ANC reflects much, if not most, of the nationalist response of the oppressed people to colonial conquest in the British dominion territory that became South Africa. All I want to assert in this connection is that the notion of the “South African nation” that eventually became consolidated in the ranks of the ANC itself and of the Congress Alliance, more broadly, was that of a “four-nations” constellation based on the hegemonic paradigm of four races: black, coloured, white and indian. This was most clearly formulated in the ANC Youth League programme adopted in 1944. The relevance in this context is that in the centenary January 8 statement, there is no attempt to analyse or to update this notion in the light of the constitutional rhetoric about a “non-racial” or non-racist South Africa. This is unfinished business, software matters that are integrally related to the economic hardware I shall refer to presently. It is business which, if left unresolved for whatever reason, will see this country engulfed in the ethnic and racial conflicts that continue to devastate much of Africa north of the Limpopo. If the ANC leadership is serious about

the national dialogue that President Zuma seemed to want to initiate, this is one of the priority questions on the agenda. The answers we arrive at will radically transform our school and university curricula and the media, among many other things.

The second point to insist on is that the struggle, as conceived by the ANC virtually from the day it was formally established had to eventuate in the kind of negotiated compromise we arrived at in 1993-94, unless the world situation had tilted the balance of forces in South Africa in favour of social revolution. Again, space does not permit the detailed analysis that is essential for a nuanced understanding of the situation. However, Sassoon reminds us of the manner in which Leon Blum, one of the most influential French Socialist leaders in the inter-war years tried to explain the position of the social democratic party governments in Western Europe under conditions that bear comparison with post-1986 South Africa. He distinguished between the *conquest* and the *exercise* of power. In my view, this captures exactly the situation into which the ruling party allowed itself to be manoeuvred during the early 1990s. The notion of “the exercise of power” functioned “[...] as a theoretical justification should the SFIO (French Socialist Party NA) be `forced` into government before the conditions for the conquest of power were ripe. Until capitalism collapsed, all socialists could hope for was to `exercise` power, which meant pursuing limited reformist goals. During the exercise of power, there would be no major change in property relations.”

Indeed, if one follows this logic, and we have every reason to consider it seriously, we are on the verge of a much more serious situation, one which Blum labelled the `occupation of power`, a defensive – anti-fascist - strategy. To put it differently: in order to ward off the populist demagogues, it may become necessary to abandon even the fig leaf of the `National Democratic Revolution`. In Blum’s terms: “[...] (The occupation of power) was, clearly, not the `conquest` of power but it was not an exercise of power either, because it was not meant to prepare the way for a social revolution. The occupation of power – in practice an occupation of office – was a strategy aimed at denying the forces of fascism access to power”.

The third, indeed, the decisive, issue is that of the economic system. The German Social Democratic Party leader, Rudolf Hilferding, faced, like all other socialists at the time, with the obvious fact that a “parliamentary road to socialism” was mere pie in the sky, had come to the conclusion that the emergence of cartels and monopolies that dominated and shaped the world capitalist market was in fact the beginning of the socialisation of the means of production. In this process the state could, and should, play the decisive role in managing the capitalist economy for the benefit of the workers and of poor people, more generally. This is, clearly, a prefiguration of the much-vaunted “developmental state” that is supposed to free us out of the vice grip of neo-liberalism. However, as Sassoon stresses: “The road to a planned organization of society was now open. The sole remaining problem was that control was still in the hands of capitalist private interests. [...]. Though in government, the SPD could do little to gain control over the economy.” He goes on to narrate the process that led to the eventual “state of deadlock” in the Weimar Republic. The rest, as the saying goes, is history.

Historical analogies are always dangerous. However, beyond all the songs of praise and the justified criticism of the philistine ostentation of the Mangaung event that have filled the media for a few days, it is essential that we draw back the attention of the citizens of this country to some of the fundamentals that remain to be addressed, if we are to find a way forward. *There are alternatives*

and all of us should use all available forums to explore and discuss these. We certainly do not need the ANC, or any other political formation for that matter, to preside over such a national dialogue. The ANC was without doubt the dominant current in the struggle for national liberation, a struggle that continues with increasing vigour as an aspect of the general struggle for social justice against the disastrous class inequality and dehumanising poverty that continue to characterise post-apartheid capitalism. The continued attempts on the part of some ideologues of the Alliance to capitalise on the status of “sole authentic representative of the people” of South Africa, which was – disastrously - **conferred on the ANC by some states and international agencies in the 1980s** are not only an insult to all who have sacrificed and struggled for the ideal of a democratic Azania, free of oppression and exploitation but feed the anti-democratic tendencies within the ruling party that have surfaced in recent months.

100 years of history is a more than adequate basis for learning the lessons of those who have preceded the ANC in their attempts to build a better life for all within the confines of the “free” market system. Otherwise, we will, as we are already doing, simply repeat the same errors.

Neville Alexander

278 First Avenue

Lotus River

7941

(Submitted in my personal capacity)