

Letter from Johannesburg

INSIDE THE ANC CONFERENCE

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I'm still recovering from the ANC conference. We worked until 5.30 in the morning on Sunday to get through all the business and that was followed a few hours later by a major rally in Durban. The cumulative effect of caucusing every evening until two in the morning, then getting up for breakfast at 7.0 am, plus all the tension and excitement has left me totally drained. Despite my exhaustion, I must write while it's still fresh.

I was elected by my branch to go as a delegate to the first ANC National Conference to be held in the country in thirty years [Durban, July 1991]. For the past months we had been preparing for the conference, running workshops on the ANC's constitution, on land, economic and education policy. After the branch discussions members attended regional workshops where the issues were discussed by representatives from all the branches in the Johannesburg metropolitan areas. We also had three major regional meetings to discuss the ANC constitution, the balance of forces in the country and the way forward. (That's struggle talk). Caucusing on the new leadership has been going on for the past two months at least. Surprisingly, there was a great deal of agreement about the top positions, especially Mandela, Sisulu and the trade unionist Cyril Ramaphosa.

Disorganised as ever, I missed the bus on Monday, but got a ride down with two journalists...It was difficult to concentrate on the conversation, a million thoughts raced through my head, all my expectations about the conference, feelings of inadequacy, and the responsibility of being elected as a delegate. The idea that a group of people would actually want me to go on their behalf made all my old feelings, inadequacies and insecurities more acute.

At the regional conferences there was an undercurrent of fear about going to Durban. I heard a rumour that MK, the ANC's army, would be protecting the delegates on the buses. One delegate from Vosloorus thought that a Zulu impi would be hiding on the side of the road, waiting to ambush a bus load of ANC delegates. For many, Natal was this strange violent place: the home of an evil, as demonic as apartheid itself, the home of Inkatha and Buthelezi.

The buses from Johannesburg arrived after I did, safe but late, on Monday night. From other regions of the country, the buses brought the diversity that is the ANC. Rural chiefs from the Transkei, old men with white hair and great dignity. From the western Cape, the militant, politically sophisticated young comrades led by Trevor Manuel, a 'coloured' man of great charisma. From the northern Orange Free State, peasants and workers, few with higher education. While some had experience in large political conferences, for many others this was the first time in a large city and on a major university campus.

The conference was held at the University of Durban-Westville, a large ugly campus built during the period of high apartheid for the segregated Indian com-

munity. On the summit of a hill about ten miles from the city centre, the campus was relatively isolated from the community and from the outside world. Cut off, that is, except for a huge communication centre, set up by the ANC for the journalists with hundreds of computers, telephones and fax machines. The ANC is beginning to realize that journalists are almost as important as the delegates to the conferences.

The next morning we entered the sports centre, the place where we were to spend most of the next week. The inside walls of the stadium were covered with brightly coloured silk-screened banners with wonderful pictures and slogans of the Freedom Charter: 'the doors of culture and learning shall be opened', 'the land shall be served by those that work it', 'the people shall govern', 'there shall be homes, security and comfort', 'there shall be peace and friendship'. The delegate's seats and tables faced the National Executive Committee [NEC] on the stage. Above the platform a five high, five wide, stack of television monitors would project superlarge images of speakers.

In true ANC fashion, things started late. By ten o'clock nearly all the delegates, press and visitors, were seated, but the NEC had still not arrived. There was excitement and expectancy in the hall as the old NEC gradually took their places on the stage. Last to arrive were Mandela and Oliver Tambo. As the frail man painfully descended the stairs the delegates broke out in songs of praise for Tambo. The sick old man is a symbol of unity, a leader above all debate, above all factionalism and possible divisiveness. He represents the legacy of the oldest political movement in Africa, the liberal traditions of Christian missionary struggles against the brutality of a system his generation could never fully come to grips with. At his side was Archbishop Trevor Huddleston who had returned after thirty years, the international leader of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM). He'd been asked to say the opening prayer, as was the custom at all major ANC events. It's hard even for a moment to forget that the ANC is basically a Christian movement. Despite all the communists, its true character is never far from the surface.

After thirty years, President Tambo addressed his movement in his own country. Slowly, and at times incoherently, he tried to explain what had happened in the last thirty years, in life and work in exile. The conference listened with patience and compassion to the stumbling words. At midpoint he stopped, begged the conference's forgiveness that he had asked the deputy-president, Mandela, to present the second half of the presidential address.

The theme of Mandela's speech was clear. The ANC had not defeated the present regime, despite the fact that the government had been forced into negotiations. The struggle had just changed form. To achieve the central objective, the transfer of power to the people, the ANC needed to win the struggle on a new terrain. To regain the initiative, and bring about change as soon as possible, the ANC needed to go full steam into the negotiation process. For the first time, the idea of a time-frame was introduced, a time table for a genuine interim government and free elections.

In his view the National Party did not enter into negotiations to abdicate power. Rather it was using the negotiations and the violence to prevent the genuine trans-

fer of power. On the violence, a new analysis was being developed. As in Nicaragua and Mozambique, violence was directed not just at opposition movements, but at the population as a whole. The people, it was believed, would become so tired of the terror that they would choose peace — surrendering the call for a genuine transformation of society. In his words, 'the lesson from this must surely be that as long as we make progress towards the achievement of our goals, so must we expect that those who fundamentally disagree with these goals will resort to violence and terror to deny us the possibility to move forward'. The government wanted to carefully control the process of change, a process of which they cannot and should not be in control. As they lose control over the process, they resort to forms of 'counter-revolutionary' activities to restore their position. Mandela accused Pretoria of having a double agenda: of talking peace while conducting war.

The implications are clear: on the one hand the ANC must attempt to defend the communities against the assaults, on the other it must go full steam ahead in the process of negotiations. Over and over again he talked of the speedy transfer of power. The ANC must prepare itself now for the all-party conference, for the interim government and the elections for a constituent assembly.

What seems to be new about this analysis is the recognition that the government is not negotiating away its power, but rather negotiating to retain power. The ANC negotiation strategy during the last year has been rather legalistic, attempting to move step by step to ensure that the obstacles to negotiations had been removed. The new approach it seems will view negotiation far more strategically, and begin to play the game the way that de Klerk has done so skilfully until now. I don't think that many people picked up on the shift in Mandela's position. It needed to be fleshed out and discussed more thoroughly in the commissions on strategy and tactics, negotiations and the violence, that met the following day.

Tuesday evening's session ended late, and already we were hours behind schedule. The reports of the Secretary-General (S-G) and the Treasurer-General (T-G) had not been presented, nor had we agreed on what would become the hottest debate of the conference — electoral procedure.

Wednesday morning was taken up discussing the reports of the S-G and the T-G. I was amazed at the huge assets of the organization which included properties all over the world, houses and apartments in London and Paris, Bonn, Rome and all over Africa and north America. The organization needed to find a way to realize some of these assets as most of the funding came from unstable foreign donations and grants. The old founders, the Soviet Union, the eastern bloc, and the Scandinavian countries will inevitably reduce their support as time goes on and as the ANC takes on a greater responsibility during the interim government period. In the next few years an enormous amount of money will be needed to contest the up-coming elections.

Until lunch time on Wednesday delegates on the floor seemed to be passive. The direction of the conference had been determined by the executive on the stage. All that changed dramatically. The issue initially seemed fairly straight-forward. We needed to decide on a voting procedure for the in-coming NEC. The Women's

League had initiated a campaign of affirmative action within the ANC, that is, 30% of all elected positions at all levels would be reserved for women. At the various regional conferences, the rule had been agreed upon. In the PWV (my region), it was passed after an intense struggle. But now the supporters of this policy had to convince everyone, not just the most advanced sections. The discussion began with a bang. Suddenly the stadium was alive with debate. Women and men rose to make impassioned speeches about women's oppression and the need to make structured space for women's participation. Frene Ginwala, from Johannesburg, pointed at the stage and asked why were there so few women on the NEC. There are two possible answers: either women are not as good as men as leaders, or the organization and the tradition of male domination restricted access of women to leadership positions. If the latter were the case, then what was needed was not another resolution about fighting for women's liberation, but concrete steps within the organization to address the oppressive legacy. 'Terror' Lekota, a leading figure in the United Democratic Front (UDF), responded. He argued that leadership should be elected on the basis of merit alone.

At a moment of impasse the singing began. Regions which supported the 30% rule stood up and began singing a song associated with the women's struggle. Some individuals in anti-30% regions stood up and joined in. If words could not sway, perhaps the men needed to be reminded about women's centrality in the struggle through song. For half an hour the singing continued. Delegations made and waved large signs of 30% on pieces of paper.

After the singing died down, the debate continued. The arguments continued in the toilets, over a cigarette and outside during dinner. The conference had come alive. The divide was clear. The delegates from the large urban centres tended to support the percentage rule, the rural areas to oppose it. During dinner the women called a special meeting to discuss the matter. Rumour spread that they would walk out if the vote went against them. When we reconvened the atmosphere in the hall was very tense. In the middle of the voting Mandela stood up and asking that no vote be taken, called for a compromise which had been formerly rejected by all parties. He begged for unity, pleading that this matter should not cause division and damage the organization. As he spoke it became clear that the issue had changed. It was no longer a matter of affirmative action. We, as the delegates of our branches, had chosen to vote on the issue. It was not for Mandela to force a compromise that no one wanted. Delegates responded with anger at this intervention. 'Terror' came very close to accusing Mandela of undemocratic practice. The women stood up and called for a vote, arguing that the debate alone had put the issue on the agenda of the ANC. Its rejection would send an important signal to the Women's League that such a decision could not be imposed from the top down. What was required was political education at the grassroots to explain why the rule was so important for the movement. As the floor seemed to be moving against Mandela he made a final impassioned personal plea, directed specifically at 'Terror' and Andrew Mapeto, two of the most outspoken supporters for taking a vote. Mandela left them little choice but to back down. A compromise was grudgingly accepted. The vote was not taken.

In many ways this issue reflected two very different conceptions of democracy within the organization. Mandela and the old guard strive for a compromise that would be worked out behind closed doors between the leaders. A younger group wanted a participatory democracy in which decisions taken by the majority were accepted by the minority. To change a position, it was up to the minority to convince the majority. Only by the process of debate and engagement, of struggle with the issue, would a decision be accepted by all. Compromise left the issue unresolved, and all sides would leave disillusioned or uncommitted. Following the compromise, voting for the leadership took place on merit alone, with no special provision for women. As it turned out, less than 25% of the nominees were women and, in the final result, women filled nine [out of 50] positions on the NEC.

The argument had taken almost a full day, setting the conference agenda back even further. There were still two sets of commissions, and plenary sessions to discuss resolutions, pass a new internal ANC constitution and vote for ANC officials. The voting for the top five positions was fairly straightforward. Mandela was unopposed as president. Sisulu was overwhelmingly elected deputy-president, respected as an independent thinker and a person who could unite the organization. Cyril Ramaphosa, the trade unionist was well supported as Secretary-General, Jacob Zuma as deputy S-G. Many were disappointed that there was no good candidate for treasurer: leaving the old incumbent to be re-elected. The most incredible thing about the voting was the excitement that it generated. For most of the delegates this was the first free and fair election in which they had ever participated. The process was overseen by liberal lawyers of unquestionable integrity. The legitimacy of the process was never in question. The delegates had been democratically elected to represent their branches, and here they were democratically electing their leadership. A strong culture of democratic participation was beginning to develop, of vigorous discussion, of decisions to be made by ordinary people, not carefully orchestrated behind closed doors.

I had decided to participate in the commission on the ANC constitution. My region had worked hard on the draft constitution and had come with a whole range of [suggested] changes. In fact we were so well prepared that my region dominated the proceedings. The main themes discussed were those of accountability, freedom of speech, and the development of structures that would encourage greater participation in decision making at the local level. Every member of the organization has to be a member of a branch, including the top leadership. The overall emphasis was on building a strong organization from the bottom up.

Unfortunately I was not able to participate in the commissions on strategy and tactics, negotiations and violence. From my discussion with those that did, it seems that issues raised by Mandela in his opening address were taken up, although the calibre of discussion was very uneven. Regrettably there is still a great deal of 'emotionalism' and romanticism in the organization, angry rhetoric and fantasies about the military wing. Despite this, a new approach was discernible. On the question of the transition period, a more militant position was developed. Although the organization will move rapidly into discussions on an interim government and a future constitution, there was a recognition that this must be

accompanied by deeper political understanding and grass root mobilization, and far more accountability to local structures. The mass actions of the last year had done little to educate people and had not been very effective in putting pressure on the government. New creative ways of organizing communities around popular demands are needed rather than mass rallies. In a time when ordinary workers are afraid of losing their jobs, the ANC cannot call people out on stay-aways or boycotts that don't have very strategic significance. The unions need to be consulted in any grassroots actions.

I spent most of the last two days in a commission on education and helped in drafting the resolutions. In some ways the education policy document was one of the weakest position papers. It did not really lay down policy options for a future South Africa, but rather discussed the need to establish structures that would develop these policy options. In the other commission discussions, on a future constitution for the country, local government, economic policy, technology, land and development, and social welfare, the tone was of moderation and thoughtful and creative thinking. The constitution commission recommended that there should be a house of assembly, and an upper house which would have a regional orientation, both elected by proportional representation. The commission on local government rejected the government's proposals which would involve maximum devolution of power to the smallest unit, the neighbourhood. This system would only entrench white privilege and not create a democratic, non-racial system of local government. On economic policy, the commission discussed the principle of a mixed economy, with state intervention to enhance growth and redistribution.

Looking through the discussion documents on these policy questions I was struck by how moderate and reasonable they are. If the militants have a clear role in the negotiations and transition discussions, the moderates and the academics seemed to dominate discussions of future policy. Perhaps this stems from failures in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The communists in the organization know how to conduct very successful struggles for power but are less well prepared to contribute to discussions of what should replace the current position.

Nearly everyone stayed up late on Friday night discussing the nominees for the NEC. We had to choose fifty people from a list of over a hundred and forty. The list included radical crazies like Harry Gwala who still defends Stalin to Sister Bernard Ncube, a rather daffy Christian lady. There were lots of people from the UDF including leaders like 'Terror' Lekota, Popo Molefe and Mohammed Valli Moosa. In the end I found only eleven people that I knew and thought were good. The voting began early on Saturday morning and continued until 4.0 pm. The result was only announced at 3.0 am on Sunday. The two most popular nominees were Chris Hani, head of the ANC army, and Thabo Mbeki the head of the international department. Many solid leaders got in including Pallo Jordan, Trevor Manuel, Lekota, Stofile, Molefe, Tshwete, Albertina Sisulu, Raymond Suttner, Albie Sachs, Barbara Masekela and Mohammed Valli Moosa. I was not really happy with the team, too many romantic revolutionaries. A number got on because of their involvement with a recent failed underground campaign called

Operation Vula, many with little political experience. The only trade union leader elected was Ramaphosa.

On a more positive note, the group is very representative with seven Indians, seven whites, four Coloureds, and a cross section of Zulus, Xhosas, Tswanas, Pedis, Swazis and Tsongas. Nobody will ever be able to accuse the ANC of being an ethnic organization again. Perhaps the best thing about the Executive Committee is the large number of people from rural areas who will be able to redress the overall urban bias of Congress.

Saturday was our longest day. Still at work at three in the morning. Just before the new NEC was announced, Thabo Mbeki reported on the foreign affairs commission. Initially there was enormous opposition on the floor to any change in the hardline position on sanctions. The first sanctions movement [in the 1970s — eds] followed a deeply racist and callous remark made by Jimmy Kruger, the head of the police, in response to a journalist's question about the death of Steve Biko. The international community was outraged when this brutal man said 'it leaves me cold'. The outrage grew when the world saw police beating up school children in 1985–86. The anti-apartheid forces were able to rally massive force for sanctions in that period. But now the world sees what seem like reforms when they see the apartheid legislation disappear. It has become very difficult for the AAM to sustain the pressure. Then Thabo told a story about an Organization of African Unity meeting in Nigeria where all the countries insisted that sanctions be maintained. A week later the Nigerians and Zimbabweans were entering into trade agreements with Pretoria. The USSR is opening an embassy in South Africa. Sanctions are crumbling, Denmark was able to stave off a major shift in the European Parliament, but only for a short while. As Mbeki explained, either we maintain sanctions and lose it as a weapon, or we seize the initiative and develop a strategic policy of selective lifting of sanctions. As the transition occurs, various forms of sanctions will be lifted until the first free elections. One simply spoken man stood up and questioned him. For them nothing had changed, how can they give up sanctions when their lives are as miserable as ever? Again Thabo explained in clear and simple terms. We need to be more strategic in our thinking, the world does not care about us, it does not act out of compassion, if we want to win we have to be realistic about how the world acts towards us. We need to capture the initiative.

After an hour of intensely serious discussion the once hostile house had shifted its position. By Sunday morning the new leadership had a mandate to develop a new policy on sanctions. Finally at 5.30 a.m., exhausted after close on twenty hours, Mandela closed the conference and delegates, guests and journalists stood up to sing *Nkosi Sikelele Afrika*, *God Save Africa*.

* Reality was more complex than our correspondent knew. Fear and manipulation were not absent. Within a week of Omry Makgoale being elected as a delegate by ANC members in Germany, headquarters in Johannesburg issued new rules which debarred him. Mr Makgoale, a former district commander of Umkhonto in Luanda, was a leader of the armed mutiny in Angola in 1984. He served nearly five years in Quatro prison. (See *Independent on Sunday*, 2 June 1991) Another delegate, from Britain, described months before the Soviet coup as a 'Boris Yeltsin', by a conference convenor, decided not to attend. — Eds.