

OPENING ADDRESS TO THE 56TH NUSAS CONGRESS BY CHARLES NUPEN.

Mr. Chairman, friends,

I notice Laura Levatan's empty chair over there, and I know I speak on behalf of the overwhelming majority of people here tonight when I condemn her banning. She is a direct, bright and tremendously energetic person who used her talents in the cause of social and political justice. Her banning is a dirty act, and its timing on the eve of your congress is a dirty tactic, designed no doubt, to sidetrack you from your deliberations over the next few days. Don't let that happen. NUSAS leaders have been banned and detained in the past, and it has only strengthened the resolve and determination of the organization. Let that tradition be continued. Of course, the reasons for this kind of arbitrary action are never furnished (speaker off mike) ... and it is really encouraging to see the great number of people here this evening. I am told that there are more delegates to this congress than at any other time in living memory. It is a testament to the tireless dedication which many of you have shown through difficult times, and I applaud that. It shows that you continue as young people, to demand the freedom to meet on your own terms, to discuss and analyse the state of your society and the contribution you will make to it. I applaud that too - I believe that much credit must go to the NUSAS leadership of the past two years for the shift in emphasis back on to the campuses, for the way in which it has addressed itself to students. On the one hand, you have had to contend with a tendency to theoreticism, and by that I mean a tendency produced by a repressive political climate which causes a retreat into political theory, and sees political activity on the part of students as irrelevant. On the other hand you have had to contend with an uncritical conformity, born through fear of becoming involved, and extending to open hostility to your principles and your policies.

In the face of this, you have opened up a path of investigation through the programme of Africanization which gives the lie to both these positions. Africanization is an embracing concept which attracts an immediate identification on the part of young white people. Certainly its implications must be worked out, and spelt out in more specific terms. But those who reject it as not being founded on a coherent theoretical analysis of S.A. society, seem to me to be missing the point. Steve Biko developed the black consciousness movement as a response to the immediate experience of racism by black South Africans. He attacked the collective experience of poverty and humiliation as suffered in apartheid society. He did not offer his people a theory to understand their suffering. He outlined as you know, in broad terms the conditions of their freedom, and allowed for ongoing theoretical debate within the organization. Similarly, Africanization is concerned in developing a response to the immediate dilemma which confronts young whites in this country. Do we have a future here? And if so, what does the situation demand of us. It is a compelling question in these times. At no stage since Sharpeville have white South Africans felt so uncertain about their position in South African society. They are confronted by the militancy of a new generation of young blacks and by escalating guerilla wars in the African sub-continent; and they are by and large bound to a colonial heritage, which renders them unable to understand and meet the challenge of these developments. They have three responses: (1) They can dig in their heels and fight to preserve the privileges which they have - call it the preservation of white identity, clothe it in whatever ideology you wish; it is a short term response which will result in much bloodshed, and it holds out no hope for the future. (2) They can leave the country. The banks and building societies are overflowing with money of those who have liquidated their assets. Businessmen are taking LSD trips abroad - literally Look See and Decide excursions to Europe, United Kingdom and America. But this response is reserved for the monied and the technocratic elite, and is simply not on for most whites. (3) We can assert ourselves as Africans, and

tackle the African reality. This is the challenge of Africanization. It requires personal commitment and self-sacrifice, but I have no doubt that it holds out the best option, the best hope, the best long-term hope for whites in this country. It demands of us a number of things. We must come to grips with the assertions of the African masses for political rights and economic prosperity and we must seriously investigate what changes there must be to South Africa's particular brand of racial capitalism in order to accommodate the fulfilment of these aspirations. It demands that we explode the myths that seek to explain our past privileges in terms of a sophisticated civilization. It requires that we shed the trappings of our colonial heritage, with its emphasis on wealth, on status and on personal ambition; that we commit our skills to community development in the broadest sense of the term. Africanization then, demands that we educate ourselves politically, that we re-order the priorities in our lives, and use our skills towards creating a new S.A. society. It sets a task for the National Union which is neither far-fetched, nor unattainable. Of course there are difficulties. The scope and nature of your enterprise has to an extent been circumscribed. What was possible in 1974 is not possible in 1978, and what is possible today will not be possible for your successors: But the drive to question, to probe, to search for alternatives cannot easily be removed from young people in these times in S.A., and students in NUSAS have shown a remarkable ability in the past to adapt to the limitations placed upon them. Four years ago we in NUSAS emphasized community programmes and social action projects, The government severed overseas funds to stifle these programmes. We emphasized political campaigns and the government restricted open-air gatherings. In 1976, it banned them altogether. You have been denied these avenues of traditional political expression, and you have shifted the emphasis back on to the campuses. This was in any event called for. There have been some impressive features of that shift in emphasis. I have spoken of Africanization. Your political analysis has become more sophisticated, and this is reflected in your publications. Events in South and Southern Africa have demanded this. No longer is it seen as sufficient to explain the events of Soweto and Crossroads and Homelands Independence in terms of the superficial critique of racial discrimination. These events have required a more rigorous historical analysis of the *raison d'etre* of apartheid. But if the student press has grown in stature over the past few years, so have attempts to stifle it. In the past year, apparently over a hundred student publications have fallen victim to the political censors. Your editors and reporters have been harrassed and put on trial. This is not surprising: In S.A. the truth is undesirable, it eats away at the lie of apartheid, it reveals the grossly inhuman practices of the apartheid system. I have a message for you tonight, and it comes from countless numbers of S.A. from outside the bounds of the student community, and that is "Keep investigating, keep analysing, and keep reporting. What you expose is widely read, and your courage in doing so is marked". Your work is all the more important as the state manoeuvres to control ideas, and to conceal information. Whites do not share the daily experiences of black S.A.; when they are denied the facts, the understanding, the analysis of their society, their insulation becomes complete. It reinforces a divided society, polarized in its perception of the lives and aspirations of its people. The privileged are unable to grasp the reality of life, what the important issues are, and what changes are needed; and the demands of the dispossessed fall on deaf ears. The Dept. of Information scandal is a useful example to look at here, because it is concerned both with the concealment of truth and the polarization of perceptions. The controversy is about corruption in government that has been exposed. We should congratulate the national press for their persistence in exposing that corruption, but as an issue of national significance, the scandal must be placed in its proper perspective. To describe the Information Scandal as one daily did, as the most important political event since union, is sheer bunkum. The scandal may result in a certain loss of confidence in government, it will be an issue around which latest conflicts of personality and approach within the government



come to the fore, it may even result in one or two prosecutions of investigators and investigated, but it is certainly not going to bring the government down, nor will it affect in any way the conditions of existence of black S.Africans. This is a root point. How many speeches on the Information issue by black S.A. have you seen reported, how many commentaries have there been in the black press? The answer is extremely few. The white perception of the scandal as having great significance is just not shared by black S.A., quite simply because blacks perceive not one Dept., but the whole system as corrupt. They generate the wealth of the country in the mines and the factories, but they receive back barely enough to reproduce themselves and their labour-power. One act of parliament can strip them of citizenship in the land of their birth; one stroke of a minister's pen can uproot their communities; or detain or ban their leaders. One indication from a white foreman can mean a job or another week of standing hundry in the queues of the unemployed. This is the black perception of the S.A. reality. These are the significant issues which touch them. Little wonder they don't go overboard about the Dept. Info. scandal, or extend a hand of thanks to Judge Mostert. There is one last point of wrong I want to deal with in respect of the Dept. of Information scandal. Four years ago I spoke on NUSAS campuses to defend NUSAS, which I did proudly, against wide ranging entrenched allegations against it in the report of the Schlebusch Commission. Some of you may remember that time. This Commission was dominated by Nat. Party politicians, and its report concerned activities undertaken by NUSAS prior to my taking office. I answered those allegations, and hopefully consigned the report to the rubbish-heap of history. The NUSAS leaders of the period under review were denied that opportunity, they were prejudged and silenced before the allegations were made public. So, Mr. Botha, we smiled wryly at your protests about the publication of one-sided, untested evidence which damns the character of your government. We are amazed at your plea for an application of the audi alterem partum rule before the issue is judged in public. The practices that you sow into the fabric of your society, you must expect to reap.

An allegation that I could not, and would not, defend, on the part of my predecessors, was that certain monies were missing from petty cash. It was in context a minor allegation, involving a minor amount, and no charges were preferred. The state was in the habit of confiscating our books of account for long periods of time, affording themselves a greater opportunity of understanding our accounting procedures than they afforded us of working on them. We admitted the mistake, tightened up our accounting procedures and laid our books of account open to inspection by students. Can we expect the same of this government in the interests of so-called open and honest administration? Right-wing students, hostile to NUSAS, got a lot of mileage out of that allegation, in fact they used Schlebusch as a whole to mount disaffiliation campaigns. I believe students have a right to know, and those right-wing students should be challenged, to reveal where they got the money to mount their campaigns and produce their glossy publications.

Another aspect of the shift in emphasis in NUSAS, that is commendable, is that you have set yourselves realistic objectives. It is an attainable goal to examine critically the content and priorities of your university education. It is possible to reorganize these priorities in the greater service of your community?

(Quote from Budlender's academic freedom address.)

"The real problem is to change the choices and the commitment of the individuals who make up the university. The primary barrier to such development will not be the unwillingness of administrators or the stubbornness of trustees; it will be the unwillingness of the students to do the difficult and serious work required, and the fear of the faculty that its security and authority will be threatened".

Attainable goals are important: White students are clearly not primary change agents in S.A. By the same token your contribution is not peripheral. I do not adhere to the view that all relevant activities will fall victim to the repressive apparatuses of the state. The government cannot act as it likes with impunity; it is to a certain extent sensitive to internal and external pressure. The protests on the death of Steve Biko have drastically cut the death rate of detainees. They have also led to the implementation of certain limited safe guards. The publicity surrounding Crossroads, in which you have played a not insignificant part, have resulted in stays of execution for that community. Its members may yet survive to work and live with their families in the area of their choice. True, these are limited victories in the total scheme of things, but they are crucially important victories for the people involved, and on those grounds alone should not be rejected. Another development is the emergence of a more critical approach to national affairs on some Afrikaans campuses. I gather that there are numerous representatives from these campuses that will attend this Congress. I am reminded of the words of Leo Marquard speaking at the inaugural address of NUSAS to both English and Afrikaans students. He said "Again it will be agreed that our different student bodies know too little of one another. This ignorance breeds distrust and engenders warped opinions of each other's capabilities, preventing anything like a proper understanding". I say to those representatives of the Afrikaans campuses, participate with open minds on the affairs of this congress; you will find an honesty of endeavour and a sincerity of purpose unappreciated by the critics of NUSAS. It is true that NUSAS stands outside, and I believe, in advance of, the prevailing views in the white community, but this is only to its credit. The National Union is one of the very few de facto white organizations which has a degree of standing and credibility in the black community. Don't let that go by default. Establish broader lines of communication with that community, for there is much that you will learn that will prepare you for the non-racial society that lies ahead, and for the great turbulence out of which that society must inevitably be born. Blacks do not ignore the actions of white students; your activities and your responses to situations are gauged within the black community. The kind of decisions you make now, and the commitment you exhibit now must ultimately determine your acceptance in that new society. In wishing you, Mr. Chairman, and the delegates, a successful congress, let me say that your organization, that our organization, has a proud tradition of achievement in difficult times. The circumstances which have caused students to protest and act have not changed at all, on the contrary there is all the more need for leaders to come forward, and for work to be done. When the world throws its hands up at the madness of apartheid, it despairs of us too, and our self respect demands that we change that. Our self respect demands that we do what is right, and not what is safe, that we take the actions that will bring justice, and with it peace, to S.A. and not the prescribed course of war and violence. Our self respect demands that we know our principles and our leaders, and not the cause of racism; that we go forward undeterred by bannings and by harassment. Let the banning of Laura Levett spur you on, there can be no better reply to it than that. We know after all that youth will prevail, we shall overcome.