

Presidential Address by Mr S Mapogo Makgatho, South African Native National Congress, 1918

Presidential Address by Mr.S.Mapogo Makgatho, of Riverside, Pretoria.

CHIEFS, LADIES and GENTLEMEN,

Once more we have come together on this Lenten afternoon to take stock of our position in the awful struggle for existence under the cloud of the war waged by the Union Government against the aboriginal races of this country. This war may be said to have been inaugurated at Vereeniging when the Native Interests were offered to get Peace with the Boers; but it remained in abeyance until after the passing of the Act of Union, under which the Natives are to carry the lion's share of the financial burdens of this Union while there is to be a colour bar in the enjoyment of the benefits. This policy became more pronounced since the promulgation of the enactments of 1911 and 1912 which made it a criminal offence for a Native to go to certain Churches or earn an honest living as a skilled worker in the Transvaal and Orange Free State. With marvellous stoicism we managed to survive the effects of these enactments. As the late Booker Washington once truly said "The negroid people of all Continents perished the moment they came into contact with civilization, but the African, alone among the black races could look civilization squarely in the face and survive". In 1913, however, the war against the blacks was intensified by means of the atrocious Natives Land Act and it must be confessed that even the world renowned tenacity of the African is crumbling beneath its operation. The most well-to-do of our brethren have been hounded out of the farms and forced to seek an asylum beyond the boundaries of this Union. Others, driven from the country are seeking an impossible existence in the towns to which they are not accustomed, squandering nearly all their substance in their plight, our menial position has not permitted us to take an accurate account of the losses sustained by them in their flight from the drastic operation of this law, but a rough estimate will place it at several million sterling; yet all our protests and the missionary appeals to the white man's sense of justice have thus far fallen on deaf ears and the Act is still chasing and harrassing our people from one end of the country to the other. Others of our people, with marvellous tenacity, are still holding on to the farms in the hope that God, in his Providence will send them some relief, but none is forthcoming. Their draught animals are used to enrich various members of the poor white brigade and they too are forced to render unpaid service for the right to live in the country as that kind of life is a crime under the Act unless they are serfs. But what, may I ask, is this UNION GOVERNMENT which thus distinguished itself with this chapter of injustice? It is neither Dutch nor English;

carriage at the rate of ten or a dozen to each compartment. But wait for an hour at the same station and see the departure of the Cape train via Kimberley at 10 p.m. and you will see the multitude of Native Passengers struggling for standing room in only half a third class coach while white people have 14 coaches with several empty compartments. In their scramble for standing room at many of the stopping places along the Reef you will find the Sjambok and the boot freely used among people who have paid for travelling and not for the lash.

NATIVES SHOT AT SIGHT: You will have to consider the very serious question of the frightful epidemic which became so prominent during 1917, of white men killing innocent Natives, some were run over by motor cars, others were shot with revolvers, and others were shot down with rifles like Springbuk. The pretexts under which some of them were shot would be laughable if the results were not so tragic. One of them is said to have been shot because he rode a fine stallion - his own property. Some of the murderers were arrested and released on signing bail bonds for small amounts only to be acquitted later on by jurors of their own colour. These murders are bound to increase as long as juries refuse to convict white men who shoot natives. I have sometimes noticed articles in the South African papers condemning the American colour prejudice: yet I never heard Americans refusing Negroes the right to work as is the case in this country. I have been amazed to see the large sums of money which the American Municipalities and States lavish on Negro education. If Booker Washington was in South Africa he would never have done his work for the whites would never have given him the money. Here is our Booker Washington THE REV: JOHN L. DUBE, who is out to teach young Natives how to use their heads and hands with skill. But for English and American assistance his school would have been closed up long ago. Take for instance the present war. Here we are not allowed to help the Empire yet when America joined the Allies last year she opened recruiting offices for both white and black and training Colleges for the instruction of black officers.

According to the latest mail a black man,

Dr. SCOTT,

has been appointed to the American Ministry as adviser to the Secretary of War. But why dwell at length on American fair play. We have men who have never paid taxation to the American Government, yet America is educating their sons in medicine and other science and arts including soldiery and the handling of fire arms while the South African Government to which we pay taxes withholds that education and leaves the hardworked missionary to shift for himself with the education of our children. This is an impossible task for the poor missionaries because they don't get our taxes. At present time the civil and military sides of this Union have a powerful London representative in the person of,

GENERAL JAN SMUTS.

Whenever he deals with the White man's aspect of South African life it is clear that he knows what he is talking about; but each time he deals with the native aspect he is hopelessly at sea, just an extract from one of his periodical addresses to show what I mean:

"You remember", said Gen. Smuts at the Savoy, "how some Christian Missionaries who went to South Africa in the first half of the 19th century in their full belief in human brotherhood, proceeded to marry Native wives to prove the faith that was in them. We have gained sufficient experience since then to smile at that point of view."

Many will remember the unfortunate native woman who was shot for far from General Smuts' farm in about the same month as General Smuts in London was smiling at that "point of view", and those of you who have heard the dead woman's version of the fatal outrage know that such smiles are hypocrisy and can, anyway, that crack shot was never prosecuted, yet another part of the General's speech:

"With us there are certain axioms now in regard to the relations of white and black, and the principal one is "No admixture of blood between the two colours"."

If this is their principal axiom, where do these many bastard children come from? By some co-incidence I happen to live in the same district as the General - at convenient distances from the Union Capital - he on the main line to the Cape and I on the main line to Delagía. Just on the same day as General Smuts was crediting South Africa with these non-existing doctrines I was at a Police Post not very far from his house invoking the aid of the police against white South African who had made the road between a native station and the City quite unsafe for un-escorted native women. The General's theories of

"NO ADMIXTURE OF BLOOD"

may serve the purpose of throwing dust in the eyes of gullible London audiences, but they will not bear examination in Pretoria where quite a number of native women gave birth to children of mixed blood during the ten months since General Smuts "smiled at that point of view". Such illegitimate bastards will continue to be borne so long as the Transvaal laws punish black men and white women found under the same roof and refuse marriage licences to a white and black couple, while white men may legally keep any number of black concubines in the same Province with the approval of the law. There will continue to be "Admixture of blood" throughout South Africa as long as white juries refuse to convict a white man for ravishing a black woman. Today petitions are being signed for transmission to the Imperial Government praying that two of

THE FORMER GERMAN COLONIES

should be annexed to this Union. One of the arguments of the petitioners is that the step is desired in the interests of the Natives of those Colonies. Such arguments are not new to us. We know this was one of the reasons for the annexation of the Boer Republics. The reason held good for a period of seven years after the war, then the natives were handed over to a combination of the former Republicans and a motley crew of Continentals whom the late Paul Kruger very wisely refused any say in Transvaal affairs - then there commenced the persecution under which we are groaning at the present time. And we would not be doing our duty to

GOD OUR CREATOR

and to man our brother if we, who have had a foretaste of Hell, were to hesitate to inform the British Government what will be the ultimate fate of any natives brought in under this scheme. Speaking from our own experience we can safely tell the natives of the German Colonies that they will

faithfully, in the presence of Mr. Plaatje, that the Bill is coming to abolish women's passes in the Free State. The Minister has broken his promise for the Bill, instead of abolishing women's passes in the Free State, threatens to re-enact the pass laws so as to embrace nearly every woman in South Africa, including the Cape, Natal, and Transvaal where women never had to buy passes before. There are other injustices and indignities threatened by this Bill to be levelled against native men and women, and it is up to the women of South Africa to adopt all constitutional means to oppose this degradation of their sex. I know they can do it for we owe it to the

BRAVE WOMEN OF WINBURG

and our plucky mothers and sisters of other towns who, five years ago, set a noble example to the men and forced the Government to reconsider the whole question of women's passes. Having brought the Government to the reconsideration stage the Deborahs of other towns should likewise stand up, follow Mrs. Maxeke and her Transvaal sisters, and demand complete abolition. I need hardly say that our women do not deserve the indignities threatened in this Bill. They have done their duty to both

GOD AND KING.

The bones of their relatives lie buried at the bottom of the Atlantic, others have been devoured by wild animals in the East African forests, while malarial fever has levied its toll by the thousand. Their bones lie in places that their relatives will never see. It was said they

DIED FOR FREEDOM.

Whose freedom - seeing that at home their mothers and sisters must be chased out of both town and country? The blood of these sons of ours, spilled in the service of the Empire, entitles us to claim a say in the disposal of the German Colonies which they have helped to conquer. Today we are called upon to pay a multiplication of taxes imposed by a Parliament in which we have not votes, to provide allowances and pensions for the other people who made their sacrifices in the same cause but the dependants of our own warriors who perished in the same service are

NOT PROVIDED FOR.

One could go into details of this persecution but for obvious reasons it would be inexpedient to do so at present. We asked the Government on the outbreak of the war to suspend their hostilities against the natives and give us a chance to render the utmost assistance to the Imperial authorities in the war during which we undertook to shelve all our serious grievances. Such a proposition merited some recognition on the part of the Union Government but they have not abated one iota of the native persecution started five years ago.

Chiefs, ladies and gentlemen, after considering all circumstances I beg to move the following

RESOLUTION:

This Conference of the South African Native National Congress at its 7th Annual Session at Bethlehem, Orange Free State, on March 29th, 1918,

expresses its approval of the retention by Britain of the German East and German South West Africa, as the spread of British Dominion on this continent has since the days of Queen Victoria been the consistent desire of the vast majority of the native races of this country. Congress would however protest in the strongest possible language against the suggestion to hand these Colonies to the Union. If Imperial considerations demand transfer of these Colonies, then such transfer in the interests of humanity had much rather be made in favour of France or America as the next best safeguard for the natives of the conquered Colonies. After experiencing the effects of the prejudices against colour, harboured by a large majority of the present rulers of this country and suffering the vicissitudes of the Union's eight years misrule of its native population we fear that a transfer of these Colonies to the Union would be disastrous to the best interests of the native population will expose many innocent natives to burgher tyranny and defeat the ideal that our fathers had in view in their insistence upon British protection.

I pray thee therefore father, that thou wouldst send Lazarus to my father's house for I have five brethren, that he may testify unto them lest they also come into this place of torment.

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Above all the implicit emphasis of the collection on the tight linkages between economic power and success, on the one hand, and access to political power, on the other, is common to all these authors. The Randlords needed to influence, at times to control, the direction of political events, if their empires were to survive intact and be able to adapt to new conditions - their history must therefore form an essential part of any serious attempt to grasp the whole fabric of South African history. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Phillips was implicated in the Jameson Raid, or that he sat in the Union parliament between 1910 - 15 - for his letters reveal quite clearly that he believed involvement in politics was necessary if the mining industry was to satisfactorily defend its interests. Indeed, the total picture only emerges satisfactorily when we are able to see 'interest' acting in such a way that the conventional boundaries between 'the political' and 'the economic' are collapsed.

The collection operates on at least three levels, and it is the linkages between these that often provide the most fascinating reading. On the most obvious level the collection provides us with a unique and extraordinarily detailed inside view on the workings of the mind of one who had a central role in "the making of a capitalist class" in South Africa - a perspective that ranges over the important formative years of the establishment of the gold mining industry. Here we can see, in the frankness of 'inside' company directors' correspondence, the "Randlords view" of the vast panorama of issues that engaged their attention both within the industry itself, and on the broader level of the economic and political life of the era.

It tells of a personality that never seemed to doubt the validity of the maximization of profit as the central motivation of mankind; of a tireless, energetic and dynamic corporation man with an intuitive flair for evaluating mining intelligence. Yet a rather humourless (one joke in 350 pages!) and ruthless man who in his writings manages to capture so well the remorseless internal logic of the development of mining capitalism on the Witwatersrand - a ruthlessness which operates in the realm of company management (e.g. the abrupt dismissal of Warriner after years of faithful service, pp. 306, 360), labour relations or political involvement (e.g. the Jameson Raid).

The second level upon which the collection reads is as an 'inner history of the gold mining industry' - with a specific case study of the Corner House group, the central and dominant group in the early years of the industry. It gives an insight into the extent of the activities of the group, of the move from the heady days of speculative mining and the aggressive expansionism of the 1890's, to the administrative stability (and relative stagnation) of later years when the group lost its leading position. The 'interest' of the mining companies in general, and Central Mining etc. in particular, is placed at the centre of the historical stage as one reads - thus allowing the reader to feel the 'necessary logic' of events through the eyes of Phillips as the representative of the Randlords.

That in its turn brings out the third, and perhaps most important level at which the collection can be read - namely as a reflection of the general concerns and strategies of the emergent capitalist class on the Rand; its attempts to shape the overall political economy to suit its ends (the Anglo Boer War, the 1922 Strike), and indeed at times its accommodation to the constraints of that situation (e.g. the White Labour question). The policies formulated and the events enacted on the Rand were to influence the country as a whole throughout this era - the precise nature of those linkages being still the matter of much spirited debate to the present day.

The selected correspondence of 172 letters spans a period of thirty five years - the Kruger era (1889 - 1900); Reconstruction (1901 - 1907); the 'Het Volk' era (1907 - 1910) and Union (1910 - 1924). Only a few issues dealt with can be touched on here.

The centrality of the ultra-exploitation of black labour in the industry is highlighted. In an industry where large profits were demanded, and where overtime and escalating production costs went hand in hand with deep level mining and the extraction of greater quantities of lower grade ore, labour formed the one area where savings could be made by management.

After the reduction in wages for Black miners in the 1890's in an attempt to meet these constraints, the industry was forever short of its labour requirements - and Phillips was a key advocate of the system of a monopsony for labour recruitment from the early 1890's, a system which would prevent competition for labour between the mining companies and ensure a permanent low wage rate. Although the system was only perfected after Union, it forms a major theme in the thinking revealed in the letters from the earliest period. (No. 11, No. 30, Nos. 102, 113, 117, 160).

In the period after 1907, caught between the rising costs of producing low grade ore on the one hand, and the increasing demands of White Trade Unions and Black Miners on the other, Phillips revealed considerable diplomatic skill combined with firmness of purpose. While seeing the 'political' need to offer jobs to whites in a time of depression he was only prepared to do so as long as they did not undermine the long-term economic good of the industry - what he in fact achieved thereby was a degree of dilution of the white labour force (p. 190), which in turn made it possible to depart from the Status Quo agreement in due course. In an era of increasing labour militance Phillips remained inflexible to the remorseless ideology of profit maximization and labour discipline. Although dissatisfied with the government's handling of the strikes in 1907 and 1913 - 14, he introduced a radical reduction in wages in January 1922 and welcomed the confrontation that followed (the letters give some indication that he was instrumental in engineering the confrontation once he had secured Smuts's co-operation) for when it was all over he wrote to Wallers -

"Do remember that we are making a new start and have got the position more or less in our own hands. Therefore it becomes the more important not to give away a single point needlessly and to weigh very carefully the effect of any concession made in the progressive influence it may have at a future time. You have to hold in mind the psychology of the people with whom you are dealing; and in the case of labour leaders, everything yielded is accepted as a right. Nay, more, as an instalment of future surrenders to follow." (Letter 160 p.345)

What Phillips argued strongly was that White labour protest was dangerous in that it opened the way for Black labour unrest - "further concessions to White labour would be followed by trouble of a much more serious kind" which would in its turn mean that "the outlook for civilization in South Africa is black"! (A story that we seem to have heard repeated many times!) He argued that the mines were not seeking to "impose any unjust, or for that matter onerous, terms on their White employees", but that they were "driven by sheer economic necessity either to work on a less extravagant system or to shut down half the industry" - and since what was good for the industry in Phillips's terms, was good for South Africa, the latter alternative was not open.

In keeping with current revisionist analysis of South African Labour history, Phillips saw (from a different perspective) that an alliance between the Capitalists and the White Workers (on the basis of a 'Class' rather than a 'Job' labour bar, to use Johnstone's terms) against Black Workers (letter 158) as the solution to the problems facing the industry, a solution that only became a reality as a result of 1922.

What is fascinating about Phillips - the man - is that he somehow manages to incorporate all the qualities of capitalist/liberal/racist of the early years of the century. He is keen on the abolition of racial discrimination against blacks, but this only because it provides the key to cheap semi-skilled labour and would break the backs of the White trade unions. On the other hand he holds that "Natives are quite intelligent when they have to repeat an operation which they have been thoroughly taught to perform, but they would be most unsatisfactory if they had to meet an emergency in the course of carrying out that operation" - this "not on account of their colour, but of their actual inferiority" (letter 158).

The arguments, the issues and the history are still with us, and this book helps us to understand our present as much as our past.

PETER KALLAWAY

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THE GENESIS OF JOHANNESBURG.



AW Lloyd
Cartoon

September 13, 1906.