

Henry Selby Msimang

Selby Msimang was born in Edendale on 13th December, 1886, and died there on 29th March, 1982. Not many of his conscious moments in those 95 years were wasted. Hardly a single movement with which he came into contact and which he thought might bring greater freedom in South Africa did not engage his support.

His first important political involvement was in 1912, with the founding of the South African Native National Congress, later to become the African National Congress. At that time he was a clerk in the Johannesburg office of Advocate Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, recently qualified overseas and the inspiration behind the first ANC conference. As Seme's assistant he became deeply involved in the preliminaries to the conference. Afterwards, as the Johannesburg deputy for Sol Plaatje, the organisation's first secretary, who lived in Kimberley, he was responsible for much of the day-to-day administration of the new organisation. He was an important figure in the committee established to raise funds to send a deputation to Britain to try to secure the repeal of the Natives' Land Act of 1913, the source of so much misery and bitterness at that time and ever since. He continued his active



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(Photograph: *The Natal Witness*)

association with the ANC through its many vicissitudes in the period between the two World Wars, and, after the Second World War, he became the new provincial secretary of its Natal region on the same ticket which brought Chief Albert Luthuli his first important post in that organisation, that of Natal President of the Congress.

Selby had a long association with trade union work. He led a strike of municipal workers in Bloemfontein as long ago as 1917, and for that he was arrested and detained — a very gentlemanly detention by the standards prevailing at the time of his death. He helped launch Clements Kadalie's great Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of the 1920s and was for a short while its president. He was an active canvasser for Dr. Edgar Brookes during his time as Senate representative of the African voters of Natal. He was a member of the Natives' Representative Council when Dr. Verwoerd abolished it. He served the Methodist Church, to which his grandfather had been one of the earliest converts, faithfully, if not uncritically, all his life. He became involved in the S.A. Institute of Race Relations, the Joint Council Movement, the Edendale Benevolent Society, the Edendale Advisory Board and a host of other organisations. More recently he joined Inkatha and was an honoured member of its National Council.

My close association with Selby Msimang arose through the Liberal Party of South Africa. In 1951 a small group of people of all races started meeting in Pietermaritzburg to discuss a non-racial alternative to the new apartheid policies which were then starting to be so vigorously applied. Selby was one of them. This group became part of a wider Liberal Association, with branches in many of the main centres of the country, which was established later that year. In May 1953, shortly after the Nationalist Party had won its second general election, a meeting of the Association was called in Cape Town to discuss what to do next — in the light of the fact that the Nationalists seemed destined to be in power for a long time to come and the parliamentary opposition was showing no sign of being able to produce a policy which would either beat them at the polls or satisfy the increasingly articulate expression of black aspirations. Selby and I went as the two Natal delegates to this meeting and there we both voted to convert the Liberal Association into the Liberal Party of South Africa.

The Liberal Party was thus non-racial in its origins although its early membership was predominantly white. Its aims were the establishment of a democratic system in South Africa, initially on the basis of a non-discriminatory qualified franchise, but later on the basis of universal suffrage. In the new society equal rights and responsibilities would be shared by all, and vigorous steps would be taken to eliminate the inequalities which flowed from past discriminatory practices. These were the kinds of ideas that Selby really believed in and I have the feeling that the non-racial character of the Liberal Party provided him with the most congenial political home of all those to which he gave his support. Certainly the amount of energy and enthusiasm he gave to building up the Party was remarkable. His associations with the African people of Natal were very wide and there was scarcely a community in which he was not known. Through these he helped build up a network of Liberal Party branches throughout the Province and what had started off as a predominantly white organisation had, by the time it was closed down by government action 15 years later, grown into a

predominantly black organisation. Many of these branches were in black freehold areas, the “blackspots”. Selby Msimang was in the forefront of the fight to prevent their removal (as the dictates of apartheid required), a campaign in which he was still engaged, still prepared to sacrifice time and his by then failing strength, right up to the day of his death. In his home area of Edendale he helped found, and then chaired, a branch of the Liberal Party which had every race group amongst its members and was a living example of what Selby stood for and the kind of society he wanted to see established in South Africa.

What did all this achieve for Selby, his lifelong dedication to this struggle for a society in which everyone, Afrikaner as much as Zulu, would enjoy the freedom which he regarded as God-given, and exercise the responsibility to serve which he regarded as the burden the gift of freedom bestowed on every one of us? It achieved for him, in his late 70s, a banning order which cut short his political work and confined him to the district of Pietermaritzburg — and when one day, because one of his family was ill, and he forgot to make the weekly report to the police station which his order required, he was sent to prison, his first experience of the inside of a gaol since those far-off days in Bloemfontein.

Almost every campaign that Selby fought was lost, and a great many of the things he believed in were destroyed by a succession of white-controlled South African governments, and especially by the Nationalist governments after 1948. Does this mean that his life was a failure? One had only to meet him to know that the thought had never entered his head. As far as he was concerned, one fought for what was right, regardless of the chances of success, because that was what one had to do. Failure could not mean total defeat, for by fighting, one’s own integrity and dignity had been preserved.

For the last 70 years of his life Selby Msimang saw his freedom in the material world shrink steadily under the assault of the law-makers of South Africa, yet, in some strange way, when he died in Edendale on March 29th, the manner of his living meant that he died a freer man than they.

PETER BROWN

