

A FEW words by African National Congress president Oliver Tambo in London last week have thrown wide open the debate over the international cultural and academic boycotts of South Africa.

Delivering the Canon Collins Memorial Lecture in London last Wednesday, Tambo indicated for the first time that the ANC had modified its three-decade-old commitment to a blanket boycott of all cultural and academic links with South Africa. The boycotts will be continued — even strengthened — but the ANC will become selective in its choice of targets.

This was followed four days later by a United Democratic Front resolution that showed a similar shift in policy.

Tambo is listed and cannot be quoted in South Africa. However, in a telephone interview this week, the ANC's cultural representative in London, exiled author Mongane Wally Serote, explained the new attitude.

Tambo made it clear the total isolation of apartheid will be pursued with even greater vigour.

At the same time, the ANC felt it had to take account of the changes that had occurred in South Africa since the boycotts started in the late 1950s. "The president (Tambo) pointed out that there had emerged a definable alternative democratic culture — a people's culture, that gives expression to the aspirations of our people in struggle," he said.

In the view of the ANC, these developments "contributed to and were part of the emergent alternative democratic power led by the ANC". The time had come when the ANC had to

Tambo pokes a few holes in the blanket

The debate over the cultural and academic boycott of South Africa, in limbo for months, was rekindled this week when Oliver Tambo indicated an ANC shift away from the "blanket boycott" option. ANTON HARBER assesses the implications



Oliver Tambo

deal with the "alternative structures that our people have created and are creating through struggle and sacrifice".

Tambo had made it clear that "people's culture" should not be boycotted, but should be positively encouraged, supported and exposed to the outside world.

However, he did not offer details of how this should happen. He simply indicated, according to Serote, that "the ANC, the broad democratic movement in its various formations

within South Africa, and the international solidarity movement need to act together" on the issue.

The new approach applies also to artists visiting South Africa. Serote made it clear that the potential now existed for anti-apartheid artists to perform under certain conditions in the country.

"There has to be an exchange between people in South Africa and people abroad. The solidarity movement has produced cultural workers who firmly support our work and we

have to bring them together with progressive cultural workers inside the country.

"Our president has given us a task: to bring these two groups together. If, through consultation once again, we can execute this task, we will go ahead," he said.

The UDF resolution reiterated its support for campaigns to isolate "the apartheid regime" and called on these to be intensified and strengthened, but pointed out the difference between isolating "the regime" and isolating "the people of South Africa".

The UDF went much further than the ANC in that it laid down explicit criteria for selection. Tours both to and from South Africa will only be exempt from the boycott if they are "supported by the democratic movement in South Africa", "approved by overseas solidarity groups" and "contribute to the advancement of the national democratic struggle and building of a future South Africa".

Azapo, on the other hand, has stood firmly in favour of a blanket boycott. In a statement this week, Azapo president Nkosi Molala said his organisation had no intention of embarking on a selective boycott. "Our attitude is that whoever comes will justify the status quo of the Botha regime".

The Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania has remained on the side of a total ban on visitors to South Africa, but shows some flexibility on artists travelling out of the country. Gora Ebrahim, the PAC's secretary for foreign affairs, said the PAC stood by a call for people not to come to South Africa, but would accept South African visitors on certain conditions. Asked what would be acceptable, he said: "Apartheid is a crime against humanity. Artists must convey this message."

In many ways it was an unavoidable decision for both the ANC and the UDF. The cultural and academic boycotts were formulated during the 1960s when there was little

"alternative", popular or resistance culture; what popular culture existed was rarely seen outside townships, much less outside the country.

The boycotts were aimed at those either sympathetic to apartheid or silent on the matter and, when they took effect, it was these people who were most affected.

Inevitably, a national resistance movement produces a concomitant culture of resistance and in South Africa there is now a rich and fertile group of artists in every discipline who, directly or indirectly, are a part of the broad movement for political and social change.

As a result of these developments, contradictions became apparent in the cultural and academic boycotts. Artists and academics who were incontrovertibly involved in resistance travelled overseas often uncertain whether they would be welcomed with open arms or picketed by some element of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. The choice was often arbitrary, depending on whether individuals in London chose to turn a blind eye and whether this was known to sometimes over-conscientious local anti-apartheid groups not always sensitive to the subtleties of the boycott.

At times, the boycott hurt leftwingers more than anyone else, since they were more sensitive to pickets than more conservative artists. Rightwing academics continued to travel the world. The contradictions gave a great deal of fuel to those attempting to promote South Africa abroad.

However, the pronouncements by Tambo and the UDF are far from a resolution of the issue. The fierce debate about whether the boycott should be selective or blanket will now be re-

The arguments now will be over the selection criteria ... and over who makes the choices

placed by argument — no less crucial, and probably a lot more difficult — about what criteria should be used for selection, and who will wield the power of acceptance or rejection.

It was precisely because of the knowledge that a selective boycott would open up a Pandora's Box of potential problems that there was such heated debate in the build-up to Tambo's statement. Britain's Anti-Apartheid Movement, for example, had a real fear that their solidarity action would be undermined by a complex selection process that would be difficult to explain and justify to the hundreds of small local solidarity groups they represent. Many artists within South Africa were resistant to the idea that anyone should wield the power to pronounce on the political acceptability of their work.

Whatever problems there had been with a blanket boycott, it had the virtue of being non-discriminatory. There was no question of who or what was acceptable and there was no question of anyone having arbitrary powers to decide what was to

THE BOYCOTTS: SOME VIEWS FROM WITHIN

THE cultural boycott has for a long time been a strategy implemented from abroad. Now, after Sun City and post-Graceland, there is a far greater awareness about the aims and intentions of the boycott, and many local activists have seen fit to initiate discussion on the topic in recent months.

Working together with organisations as diverse as UDF and Azapo, the South African Musicians' Alliance has produced a "working" document on the boycott when it proposes a "code of conduct" for touring Sama members.

Sama believes it is important for artists to travel, but they "need to demonstrate their commitment to the struggle" at home.

But not everyone has itchy feet, and artists from a host of disciplines are currently discussing the terms of the cultural boycott, and the responsibility which artists (touring and otherwise) have towards their communities.

"It's not just to say that an artist must be relevant or progressive," explained an actor. "We need to ensure they can demonstrate their answerability to the masses, to the broad democratic struggle."

"Answerability" can't be cultivated overnight, and it is this realisation which has prompted many of the progressive artists to explore what sorts of structures could best facilitate the long-term growth of an expressive "people's culture".

A recent seminar hosted by the People's Creative Space in Cape Town raised some interesting points, not only about the boycott, but about the priority of cultural work on the home front.

"Too many groups perform overseas claiming to represent the exploited masses when they have never shown an organised involvement in the struggle for a democratic South Africa," argued one discussion paper.

"It is not enough for a play or a

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- Marches on its stomach (4)
- Seldom punished in wartime (5)
- Subject of controversial campaign (10)
- Alarming sound before dawn (5)
- Left, right action (5)
- Mum's the word (6)
- Come together after the war (7)
- State creates it, soldiers must fight it (5)
- Next step after 22 across (3)
- Reptilian weapon (5)
- A mother has it, a general wants it(3)
- Propaganda box (2)

ACROSS

- Offensive operation (6)
- Common to both SADF and parliament (2)
- Short-sighted leadership (6)
- Oppose fighting (6)
- With evil intent (10)
- Must be obeyed they say (6)
- Lustful corporal punishment (6)
- Conscientious objector (2)
- Tough centre (8)
- Imprisoned children are not this (4)
- Woody police it sounds like (5)
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A recent boycott rally in the streets of Toronto ... with a few words from Tambo, the cultural boycott has at last come to the negotiating table — and now the battle begins in earnest

to be seen overseas — at least in theory.

A selective boycott opens up the possibility of the threat of isolation being used not simply as a negative and destructive tool but as a weapon that can be used to stimulate and encourage the development of an oppositional culture.

But it does still pose real problems. One has to ask if this "alternative democratic culture" is as definable as the ANC suggests; what is "people's culture" and how wide a range of work will it incorporate; who will decide whether an individual work or artist falls within these definitions?

There is a great deal of work that is clearly supportive of or opposed to apartheid and the process of selectivity here should be straightforward; but there is also much that falls within the grey area between these two positions and will cause heated debate.

Are Pieter-Dirk Uys's plays a part of the "alternative democratic culture"? Does Hugh Masekela's trumpet "contribute to the building of a future South Africa"? Will the Anti-Apartheid Movement accept the work of an academic who is critical of the ANC? What will they do about, for example, an academic who is close to the trade unions (and therefore unquestionably part of the broad demo-

cratic movement), but who is critical of the UDF? What about a writer whose work is supportive of Black Consciousness? Will artists be judged by the politics of their art, or will art be judged by the politics of the artist?

According to Serote, these questions will have to be sorted out

Will artists be judged by the politics of their art or will art be judged by the politics of the artist?

through a long process of consultation. "We don't want to give any formulae," he said.

"This is going to be a process of consultation so that we can formulate an approach. The president (Tambo) has said that through consultation we will decide how to expose and develop people's culture while isolating apartheid.

"It's not going to happen tomorrow, or even in the next year. This is just a process that's beginning now and will carry on even after we have taken power."

By STEVE GORDON

song to have a progressive political content. Cultural workers need to demonstrate a sustained and committed involvement in progressive organisations ..."

The cultural boycott is thus seen as only one of the many issues facing artists in South Africa.

Rather than attempting to address this topic in isolation, indications are that many involved in cultural work feel the boycott can only really be clarified once cultural workers are united and organised.

So, while the ANC might be more open towards a selective application of the boycott, it has clearly thrown the ball back into the court of the people who are affected by it.

With meetings of artists from different disciplines scheduled for the next few months, it is highly probable that the cultural boycott will be high on the agenda.

Meanwhile, for those with itchy feet, a history of commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle could be far

more important than visas and work permits when planning to work outside the country.

VUSI GUNENE reports that Professor Eddie Webster, past president of the Association of Sociologists of South Africa, welcomed the clarification of the ANC attitude.

"It would be an acknowledgement that important struggles are taking place inside South African universities at present for a non-racial and democratic education.

"However, I envisage major problems in deciding who shall be exempted and by what criteria. I am unhappy with individual endorsement as this could be open to abuse and opportunism," he said.

Allan Mabin, chairman of the Academic Staff Association at the University of the Witwatersrand, said a re-think of the boycott was needed.

"Instead of building an alliance with the academics in strong anti-apartheid structures, the boycott is strengthening the state," he said.

How will this happen? "The only way to do it is through organisation. I am sure the most important thing is that cultural workers organise themselves around this issue and work closely with the democratic movement. That is the only way we can develop and expose people's culture.

"Some artists have begun to organise themselves. This is a very positive thing. But it must be much broader than it has been so far. They must consult with their fellow artists and with the democratic movement," he said.

"The president has given us a challenge: how are we going to support and expose and develop people's culture? We must find a way, but it will take time."

The apparent flexibility of this attitude is likely to please most local artists and defuse some of the fears that a European visa will be dependent on

Picture: PAUL WEINBERG, Afrapix the critical acclaim of Khotso House.

But this is countered by the attitude of the UDF, which has already spelled out its criteria. The UDF has come down on the side of insisting that organisations here and overseas should have sole veto rights — something that is going to make many artists uneasy.

The process now of sorting out the different views and setting criteria for selectivity could become a nightmare. If criteria are very narrow, they will be inflexible and cause fierce disagreement. If they are very wide — as the UDF criteria appear to be — they allow for arbitrary interpretations.

Artists are not easily going to accept that political organisations should wield the power of selection and the latter are not likely to allow artists to do so alone.

Clearly, the debate over the cultural boycott is just beginning.

The bellowing driver charged for racist insult

A YELLOW Mercedes whose driver has been charged with crimen injuria for allegedly shouting racist insults at church ministers is registered in the name of a retired sergeant major, Sgt P Longridge, at the Grahamstown Army Base.

The incident occurred before the enthronement ceremonies of the new Anglican Bishop of Grahamstown, David Russell, on Sunday.

A group of black and white ministers was about to enter the cathedral when the driver of the Mercedes stopped and allegedly started shouting at the whites that they were "kaffir-lovers" and at the blacks that they were "f---ing murderers" and should "get out of the street".

Later, in his charge, widely regarded as the guideline for the diocese, Russell said South Africa was engaged in a civil war which would continue as long as the structures of society remained unjust.

"I am convinced that it is contrary to the demands of the gospel to be fighting for such a cause, for I do not believe that this is the way to establish a just peace in our land," he said. "It is a prescription for more prolonged, ravaging violence and destruction."

People who discouraged the church from playing a political role were engaged in a highly political activity, he said.

He called on the congregation to push "harder and more courageously for the total integration of our schools" and attacked a number of apartheid laws as "un-Christian". He urged people to work alongside the Black Sash, Legal Resources Centre and Sached, all "dedicated to humanising this broken society". — Albany News Agency

Harare blast

AN article on Page 7 of Weekly Mail Vol 3 No 20 dealing with the attack on the ANC's Harare office, should have been attributed to Pacific News Service. The graveyard referred to is not a special "ANC cemetery". The previous raid was in 1986, not 1983. The Weekly Mail regrets the errors, which occurred during editing.

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