

DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVED WORKER RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE FARMER

Speech delivered to the Nottingham Road Farmers' Association

by Selby Msimang

To me this is the beginning of a new era in the history of race-relations in this country. Forty years ago, more or less, no-one would have dreamt it possible for an audience of White farmers, of their own volition, to allow themselves to be addressed by Africans, especially on a topic closely associated with their vocation. At that time, I hope I do not exaggerate, agriculture in this country had not made the strides in technology and scientific research to the heights reached today. Similarly, the type of worker required now must conform to the standard of operations of the new era. In those days farmers were invariably indifferent as to the quality of labour they got. The criterion was the number. As things are today, it means a change in the relationship between the farmer and the worker. It is this change that poses a challenge to a modern farmer—a challenge of no small magnitude.

Looking back to the period prior to the enactment of the Natives Land Act of 1913, agriculture in South Africa was, if anything, in a state approximating stagnation. Most farmers, as a result of the Anglo-Boer War did not have adequate capital and the know-how of the present standard. Consequently, some of them were compelled to abandon their farms to work in industrial areas to raise capital, leaving their farms to be operated by their squatters on a half share basis. I am not sure if this practice obtained in Natal, but it certainly was the case in the Free State and Transvaal.

I recall a case that was brought to my knowledge of a farmer on the Vaal who had almost decided to sell his farm because he could not make it pay, for lack of capital. His squatter appealed to him not to sell but to allow him (the squatter) to work it for at least two or three years. To this the farmer agreed and packed his things and went away. Sibeko, for that was the name of the squatter, grew teff grass in the first and second years with wonderful results. In the third year he planted mealies. The results were almost miraculous. When the farmer returned, he was astounded and complimented Sibeko for his achievement.

Then came the Natives Land Act of 1913, the provisions of which I have no doubt you are all conversant with. That law had a tremendous psychological effect on the entire African



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population. It pulverised their soul, destroyed their sense of identity and reduced their personality to zero. This was because it left them without hope; their future was bleak. The worker saw himself a slave, a vagabond in his fatherland. What could he do? The law prevented him from buying, leasing and occupying or having any interest of whatever kind on land, except in scheduled areas. He was therefore at the mercy of the farmer who would dictate the terms and conditions. The farmer could easily demand free labour in lieu of a site for erecting a hut, a small garden and limited grazing rights. It should be appreciated that a man taken on under those conditions cannot be expected to give of his best as a labourer. He would become a mere automaton, and not a conscientious worker. And a farmer on the other hand, observing this passive attitude would become irritable and tend to extract more labour from the worker by sheer force.

The ravages of the Natives Land Act took the form of wholesale evictions, especially in the Free State and some parts of the Transvaal. One could see a man, his wife and children driving their livestock listlessly, not knowing where to go. Some lost their livestock and gravitated to industrial areas. And as they could not find any accommodation, they had to do as best they could with the result that serious slum conditions developed and there was increasing irregular urbanisation.

Within ten years the situation had so deteriorated that Parliament had to enact posthaste the Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923. That was the second phase of the Natives Land Act in terms of which several families were endorsed out of urban areas. That aggravated their frustration, brought about general demoralisation, the cause of the problems confronting a modern farmer.

All persons interested and engaged in the task of rehabilitating or uplifting the African people today, are hard pressed to find a solution to the problem of how to inject in these people the power of self-discovery, how to generate in them hope and self-confidence, how to motivate them to the higher productivity required to pay higher wages and improve conditions.

Professor Nyembezi has told you of the traditional life of the Zulus, the unique status of the head of a family, the respect the head is accorded by the family. Imagine a child suddenly finding his father treated like a little boy, made to trot about the farm and being called names sometimes. The effect of such treatment on the child will destroy all respect it ever had for the father and the child will develop a character reflected in a child that had never been disciplined.

The modern farmer is meeting this type of character in the present generation of workers. A generation thirsty for and determined to find a goal, something to live and work for.

Take a young man brought up on the farms and registered as a farm labourer. When he goes out to find work elsewhere, and because his pass shows he is a farm labourer, he is rejected and told to go back to the farms. He becomes rebellious and develops a hatred for farm work which to him is as good as a prison. He wants to be extricated from this condition and to live the life of a human being. How can we bring this young man into conformity with reason? How can we rehabilitate him? I repeat, this is the challenge confronting a modern farmer.

The KwaZulu Government is facing the same problem—the problem of awakening in the African a sense of self-realisation. Recently it appointed a commission to investigate and recommend ways and means by which the average Zulu could be made conscious of the important place occupied by agriculture in the life of a community or country. Certain ideas have been put forward suggesting as a priority the creation of an incentive attractive enough to produce in the man the urge to play his part in the development of his country. The KwaZulu Government has been urged to make a thorough survey of the areas with sizeable arable lands, subdivide such land into small farms, have them properly fenced. Where such land is large enough to accommodate five potential farmers, it be subdivided into five equal parts, the centre of the area to be allotted to a qualified demonstrator, and the other subdivisions to be allotted to apprentices who at the end of the apprenticeship should be granted leasehold rights thereon of, say, ninety-nine years. To qualify for a leasehold right it would be certified by a competent board that he has the required qualities and qualifications of a bona fide farmer. It is hoped the incentive of having leasehold would produce bona fide farmers capable of producing food to feed the nation.

We of course know that land in KwaZulu is the property of the South African Bantu Trust and that KwaZulu government can only make use of the land subject to the pleasure of the Trust, and not otherwise. The highest incentive of course would be freehold rights which KwaZulu cannot offer.

The demonstrator, so situated between the apprentices, would be in a position to demonstrate on the principle “do as I do”. The apprentices should be supplied with all implements which they may eventually own. In this way it is hoped many will come forward and be producers of food for the nation. As you will see, this involves training.

The sugar industry would appear to be succeeding in its efforts to interest Africans to take up cane growing seriously. African sugar cane growers have now formed an association and the sugar industry has provided a fund to assist beginners and smaller growers. I do not, of course, know if the agricultural industry can go the length already covered by the sugar industry, but I believe it can help by examining the possibilities of taking on apprentices on their farms who would, after qualifying, be employed by the KwaZulu Government as demonstrators. KwaZulu will require a crash system to produce as many demonstrators as will be required.

Farmers on the borders of the homelands can perhaps make themselves available to their African neighbours by giving advice and suggestions and assist in the same way Mr Neil Alcock helped his neighbours in the Bulwer District. He got himself interested in their struggles and arranged a system of co-operative buying of fertilizer, seed and even groceries. These are some of the strategies farmers could adopt by first exhibiting a personal interest in the progress of their African neighbours, a show of goodwill and a spirit of helpfulness.

To my way of thinking farmers should try to accept that an African worker, like all human beings, wants security. He may not know how to spell it out, but he sees other races around him obsessed with making themselves secure. It appears to him as if security to them has become the god of the times and he ascribes the reason for the condition in which he finds himself as their being enforced to safeguard their security at his expense. He may not know how to spell it out, but he sees other races enjoying a protected right to work, a guaranteed annual wage, unemployment benefits, pension schemes, the freedom to enjoy life knowing that they need not fear or be anxious about the future. When he visits his friends in the urban areas, and finds them leading a life, not entirely full, but not as bad as his own on the farms, his soul goes out craving that some day he may be able to give up farm work and go elsewhere.

Farmers should think of providing their farm labourers with sporting facilities, education, and as far as may be practicable, make life generally interesting.□