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NATIONAL UNION OF SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS

ADDRESS BY DR. ALAN PATON ON THE
SIXTH NATIONAL DAY OF AFFIRMATION
AND HUMAN FREEDOM IN THE GREAT
HALL, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
THURSDAY, 6th. JUNE, 1968.

I have the honour to deliver to you tonight your Sixth Day of Affirmation Lecture. December 10th. 1968, will be the 20th. Anniversary of the adoption by the General Assembly of the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and this year 1968 is designated International Human Rights Year.

This Universal Declaration was an affirmation by a majority of the nations of the world of the belief that man has certain inalienable rights, that he is not a man if he does not possess them, that he cannot live with dignity or purpose without them. It is an affirmation of the belief that he has rights even as against the State, that he may not be enslaved or tortured, that he may not be arbitrarily arrested or detained or exiled, and that if he is charged with the breaking of any law, he shall be entitled to a fair and public hearing in a court of law, and that it is only a court of law that shall have power to punish him, to lay hands on his property or his person, and to restrict his freedom.

The Universal Declaration also affirms that anyone who works, anyone who is ready to work, has a right to be given work, to choose the kind of work for which he is fitted, to be paid fair wages, to form protective unions, to be given leisure, shelter, and the necessary social services, to be given security in unemployment, sickness, disability and old age. All have a right to education, and elementary education shall be free and compulsory. Higher education shall be accessible to all on the basis of merit. All education shall be directed to the strengthening of respect for human rights.

None of

None of these rights shall be enjoyed or exercised at the expense of the rights of others, and it shall be the duty of the State to devise a just order in which its citizens may be able to exercise their rights and discharge their responsibilities to their communities.

This Declaration of Human Rights was the second time in the history of Man that the nations of the world sat down and dreamed a dream. Listen to the words of General Smuts:

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and the worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of internal law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

AND FOR THESE ENDS

to practise tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force should not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples.

HAVE RESOLVED TO COMBINE OUR EFFORTS TO ACCOMPLISH THESE AIMS

Accordingly, our respective Governments, through representatives assembled in the City of San Francisco, who have exhibited their full powers found to be in good and due form, have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations

and do

hereby establish an international organisation
to be known as the United Nations.

And what has become of the United Nations? It is a common pastime to sneer at their organisations and its ineffectiveness, and a common error to forget the reasons for it. For built into the United Nations Organisation is the alarm mechanism that goes off each time it is in any danger of achieving the noble aim for which it was created. The United Nations Organisation is ineffective, not primarily because its member governments want it to be ineffective, but because it is a dream. And one of the questions I want to discuss here tonight is whether there is any point in dreaming at all. General Smuts started his Preamble with the words "We the peoples of the United Nations" and ended it with the words "accordingly, our respective Governments ...", and we ought to know, and we must know, and especially as university people we must know, that what peoples dream and what governments do are not necessarily the same thing.

The first 20 years of this dream have not seen faith re-affirmed in fundamental human rights, or in the dignity and the worth of the human person, except on occasions such as these. Is it worth while holding these days of affirmation when fundamental human rights, and the dignity and the worth of the human person, which are among the deepest hungers of the peoples of the world, are on the retreat in the face of the inexorable advances of our respective Governments? Is it worth while affirming and re-affirming? That is what we are considering tonight. The important question is not whether the dream is to be fulfilled, the important question is whether we should go on dreaming it.

It was part of the intention of the Preamble that armed force should not be used, save in the common interest. In whose common interest is the war in Vietnam? To many of us the war in Vietnam is so terrible that there cannot be any justification for continuing it.

The Soviet Union has launched Human Rights Year by sending some of her bravest and finest citizens to prison, because

they believed

in their right to freedom of speech and assembly.

The British Government has refused the right of entry to thousands of Kenyan Asians who are full British citizens, and who were encouraged by the British Government to become British citizens.

Here in our own country it required no action by any court of law for a man or woman to be deprived of freedom to associate, to move about, to speak, to write, to publish, even to eat and drink with friends. Year after year our Government takes to itself greater and greater power, and each time it does so, the rights of its citizens are diminished, and not only the rights of its citizens, but the rights of its institutions also, including this great University of the Witwatersrand, which each year affirms an ideal which it is no longer lawful to practise. And here again we face the question which this night is demanding an answer from us: is there any point in affirming an ideal which it is no longer lawful to practice? is there any point in affirming a belief which has no apparent relation to what is called contemporary reality?

What are the alternatives to the affirmation of an ideal that appears to be unrealisable? There are two alternatives - one is to give in, the other is to despair. I do not count cynicism as a third alternative, because it is a cloak for despair. And this cloak we hold tightly to ourselves, lest anyone should tear it open, and see that we are in despair.

If any man was entitled to despair, it was Bertrand Russell during the 1st. World War of 1914 to 1918, when the bright youth of Britain, France, and Germany were exterminating one another, when a hundred thousand lives of promise were sacrificed to gain a few yards of mud, and another hundred thousand sacrificed to win a few yards back again. And the consequence of this sacrifice, this dying, this struggle to the death, this unspeakable heroism, was to give to Europe twenty years later the unspeakable horrors of Dachau, Belsen, Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Bertrand Russell wrote

"Intellectual integrity make it quite impossible
for me to accept the war myths of any of the

belligerent

nations. Indeed, those intellectuals who accept them were abdicating their functions for the joy of feeling themselves at one with the herd, or in some instances from mere funk. This appeared to me ignoble. If the intellectual has any function in society, it is to preserve a cool and unbiased judgement in the face of all solicitations to passion.

And again:

I saw also how the ordinary virtues, such as thrift, industry, and public spirit, were used to swell the magnitude of the disaster by producing a greater energy in the work of mutual extermination. I feared that European civilisation would perish, as indeed it easily might have done if the war had lasted a year longer. The feeling of security that characterised the 19th. century perished in the war, but I did not cease to believe in the desirability of the ideals that I previously cherished. Among many of the younger generation, despair has produced cynicism, but for my part I have never felt complete despair and have never ceased, therefore, to believe that the road to a better state of affairs is still open to mankind.

After Russell had written those words, he had to live through Dachau and Belsen and Auschwitz and Hiroshima, he lived to see the signing of the Charter that was to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights and he lived to see the erosion of those rights, he lived to see the use of armed force - which may be used only in the common interest - threaten not a small nation abroad, but a large nation at home, threaten its confidence and its pursuit of happiness, and its sweet American dream. Yet if he had been here tonight, he would have affirmed what we have come here to affirm, and how then can we believe that there is no purpose, no use, no value, in affirming an ideal which can certainly not at this time be realised, and in dreaming a dream which can certainly not at this time be fulfilled? For if we
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were to cease affirming, we would be ceasing to perform a task that man has performed from his very beginnings, we would by an act of apostasy have made of man the very creature that in our moments of despair we believe him to be.

Let us examine a little more closely the view - attractive to some of us in periods of frustration - that to affirm an ideal that cannot at this time be realised, is in fact to be doctrinaire, incapable of adaptation, inflexible, resistant to change, and unable to adapt oneself to contemporary reality. The holders of this view would argue that it is unrealistic to uphold the principle of the open university when the declared policy of the authorities is one of closed universities, that is, of ethnic universities, open to members of one race group and closed to those of others. It seems to me that this is the view that is doctrinaire, inflexible, and blind to the contemporary reality of the wider world. What is more, the open university, a place where men and women without regard to race and colour are welcome to join in the acquisition and advancement of knowledge, is much more likely to be the kind of university which will examine new ideas without doctrinaire restrictions, and revel in the impact of mind upon mind. The reason why we affirm our belief in the open university is not because we are inflexible and opposed to change, but because we believe that it is only the open university that can guide and aid and sustain our sanity in the times of tremendous change that lie ahead, not only ahead of us, but ahead of the whole continent of Africa of which we are a part, a continent whose emancipation from a colonial past we wish to help to make more real, more meaningful. And I believe with all my heart that the only kind of university which will be able to offer that kind of help will be the open university, the principle of which we affirm tonight. There are times when one cannot adapt oneself to contemporary reality. If the late Professor Hoernle had lived under Hitler he would not have adapted himself to contemporary reality, he would have rather have died, and he would have died too, because Hitler would certainly not have allowed him to live.

Now I should like to examine another view - akin to the first - that to pit the force of an ideal or a principle against raw and sometimes ruthless political power, is quite fatuous, that the only thing to pit against political power is another political power, that you must quit your ivory tower and get down there into the arena and play the game of power. But there are times when you cannot get down and play the game of power, because you have no steed, no armour, no lance. The only thing that you have is your belief, and the only thing you can do with your belief is to affirm it.

I venture to read to you words which are not usually used on occasions such as this, but which are relevant to our situation.

"For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered, nor come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.

And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people; and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying.

And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them.

They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat; for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands."

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock; and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord.

And was it ever fulfilled? No, it was never fulfilled, it just went on being prophesied. No more weeping, no more crying, no more pain. It was prophesied by John in Palmos, and Thomas More in England, and Karl Marx, and the

Charter of the United Nations, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the unattainable goal, the unfulfillable dream, the history of man's long striving for something that he has never achieved. But if he were to stop striving for it, if he were to stop striving for the unbelievable world in which the wolf lies down with the lamb, and in which the nations of the world abjure the use of war, then they shall certainly hurt and destroy in that holy mountain ; what is more, they will destroy the mountain itself, and the great adventure of men will come to its end, the priest of creation who destroyed creation, because he ceased to affirm his duty towards the things in which he believed.

I should like to address some words to the supporters of NUSAS. The words I have already used were intended to be of encouragement to them, but these are especially so.

I do not expect that the future is going to be easy for you. You have been advised by many people to drop politics and stick to your studies. This seems strange advice, coming as it often does from people responsible for giving the vote to all white South Africans when they turn eighteen. It was the intention of our legislators not that our students should eschew politics, but that they should take a lively interest in them. It was because the students of the Afrikaans-language Universities took a lively interest in politics that the Nationalist Government came to power. If there is to be any change in the dangerous foreign policies of America it will be largely due to the lively interest of American students in politics, and the fact that so many of them feel so deeply that they have actually abandoned their studies to help in the electoral campaigns, and all this because of their deep love for their country and their concern for its honourable name. I do not think it strange that South African students should sing "Die Stem van Suid-Afrika" when they are saying farewell to a man who is going into exile because he has been restricted in such a way that he can no longer pursue his chosen career, for they sing also because of their love for their country and their concern for its name. South Africa has been called a land of fear.

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and that is true; but it is a land of great courage also.

Politics is life, politics is living, politics is your present and your future, with politics are bound up indissolubly your ideals and your beliefs. If you drop politics, you might as well drop living, or alternatively, you will take to what is known as the "quiet life".

There is only one word of advice that I can offer you, and that is that while you have a duty to your country and your society and your fellow man, you also have a duty to yourselves., and that duty is to join in the acquisition and advancement of knowledge, and to equip yourselves for the future by paying a proper attention to your studies.

It is right and fitting that your National Union should concern itself with the affairs of its society and its people, with the pursuit of justice as you see that justice to be, with the pursuit of freedom as you see that freedom to be, with the pursuit of truth which is another of those unattainable goals whose pursuit nevertheless gives meaning and direction to our lives. In those pursuits you are under no obligation to believe as others believe, or as others would wish you to believe. No State, no Government, no Church, no Party, has any right to tell you what you must believe, just as you have no right to tell others what they should believe. But you have a right to try to persuade others, just as they have a right not to listen to your persuasion.

It is these pursuits that make us fully human, that give us that dignity and worth of the human person which is spoken of in the Charter of the United Nations. May you continue to pursue these things, within all the limits and restrictions that may be imposed upon you, for while you continue to do this, many others will be encouraged to continue also.