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THE ASHLEY KRIEL MEMORIAL LECTURE
UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE
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I would like to thank the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation for the honour of presenting this lecture. It is an honour accentuated by the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Ashley's murder.

Yet, at the risk of appearing insensitive to so great a tragedy, I do not wish to focus on Ashley himself. All of us know of the remarkable achievements of his short twenty years. More importantly, it is necessary to both avoid the cult of the personality and to make assumptions of what Ashley may have lived to be. We have to focus

on the mission. And we must recognise that all of us gathered here and beyond have all ended in a variety of different places – some of us are public representatives, some are public servants, others entrepreneurs, some still remain full-time organisers, and yet others have had difficulty in adjusting to the scale of changes. Few of us have had a choice about what exactly we would do after that phase of struggle that so defined our being. None of us committed to the struggle with any ulterior motive or the vaguest notion of what we would be tasked with later – the only order was, and still is, service to our people.

We should also remember that yet others of our generation have passed on – whether due to natural or unnatural causes. I want to pay a special tribute to the immense contribution of Comrade Verlin Swarts who was recently laid to rest.

So, it is necessary that we draw attention to the cause for which Ashley laid down his life.

A poem by the Mozambican revolutionary, Jorge Rebelo assists in such focus, it reads

Come, brother, and tell me your life
come, show me the marks of revolt
which the enemy left on your body

Come, say to me 'Here
my hands have been crushed
because they defended
The land which they own'

'Here my body was tortured
because it refused to bend
to invaders'

'Here my mouth was wounded
Because it dared to sing
My people's freedom'

Come brother and tell me your life,
come relate me the dreams of revolt
which you and your fathers and forefathers
dreamed
in silence
through shadowless nights made for love

Come tell me these dreams become
war,
the birth of heroes,
land reconquered,
mothers who, fearless,
send their sons to fight.

Come, tell me all this, my brother.
And later I will forge simple words
which even the children can understand

words which will enter every house
like the wind
and fall like red hot embers
on our people's souls.

In our land
Bullets are beginning to flower.

Let us just listen to that strong last verse again.

*And later I will forge simple words
which even children can understand
words that will enter every house
like the wind
and fall like red hot embers
on our people's souls.*

*In our land
Bullets are beginning to flower.*

So, the challenge which arose from Ashley's murder is a challenge to those who remained. It has, for the past twenty years, been a challenge to ensure that the bullets that tore into his body in Albermarle Street in Hazendal on 09 July 1987, have flowered. It is a challenge that is continuous and presents itself to the generation of the 1980's who live on and struggle on.

To understand the flowering of bullets, we must ask the tough questions about whether the “simple words” were forged, whether these words entered every house and whether they have burnt into our people’s souls like “red hot embers”.

Looking back over these twenty years, we will acknowledge that in the immediate aftermath of his death, all of the messages were understood and, indeed, multiplied. The repetitive states of emergency failed, mobilisation increased and the apartheid regime crumbled. But, we will also all agree that there has been a break in the necessary continuity, and I think that we know that the gains of no revolution have been permanent.

All of us who spent any amount of time with the young Ashley would know of the extent to which he was inspired by other revolutions of the time – obviously the great romance of the Cuban revolution was an immense inspiration, but so too was the Nicaraguan revolution in the 1980’s, and as Africans the three great revolutions in the former Portuguese colonies were the greatest motivation. Even today, it is good to quote from Jorge Rebelo, one of our great inspirations from

Frelimo in Mozambique. Similarly, we still draw on the wise words of Amilcar Cabral who led the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau and the poet and first President of a liberated Angola, Augustino Neto of the MPLA.

Beyond the words, we need the analysis of each of these countries – to hold them up as a mirror to our own efforts and to understand the unfolding of history. Much has changed in these past twenty years – the Berlin Wall fell two years after Ashley, seven years after his passing we marked the arrival of democracy in our own country, and over all of this period the world has steadily and continually integrated.

Let us return to those four immediate revolutions that so inspired Ashley –

- Nicaragua was over-run by the US-backed Contras, the people were impoverished even more than they were under the Somoza -regime and just last year, Daniel Ortega was re-elected as President in what has now become one of the

world's poorest countries. It is probably safe to assume that the resource constraints he now faces are much, much more difficult than in the heady days after the 19 July 1979 Sandinista revolution. It remains to be seen whether the government he leads will be able to improve on the material conditions of its citizens.

- Angola, where Ashley trained, resolved its battles with the counter-revolutionary UNITA some time ago. It remains one of Africa's countries best endowed with natural resources, yet its citizens live in abject poverty and are denied access to the most basic of public services. I recently read an article that described President José Eduardo dos Santos as "one of the world's most crooked and predatory presidents in the world"¹. This is indeed a profound tragedy.

- Mozambique, remains poor and from time to time is afflicted by natural disasters, yet it is held up as a remarkable story of

¹ "Their men in Washington", Harper's Magazine, July 2007, P61

socio-economic recovery. As economic growth rates improve, so the extent and quality of public services improves concomitantly.

- Guinea Bissau is increasingly and despairingly being described as a “Narco State”. I read a heart-breaking article recently that described that country, for which Amilcar Cabral lived and died in the following terms, “there are few phone lines and almost no electricity. Even the president’s office building has a generator roaring outside. The judicial police headquarters has no working communications radio, computer or phone. Its four police cars all need repair, and there is no money for fuel. In theory police officers earn about \$100 per month. But like the nation’s judges, bureaucrats and Cabinet Ministers – they have not been paid since January. Civil servants received only three months pay last year.”²

I am afraid that I find all of this rather despairing, these countries and their revolutions were what put the fire into our bellies, and it gave us

² “Cocaine Country” by Vivienne Walt, Time magazine 09 July 2007.

hope and determination. Let us return to those beautiful words of Jorge Rebelo and ask about the words falling 'like red hot embers' on the souls of the citizens of those countries and ask the tough question, "did the bullets begin to flower?"

We have to learn from the world because we tend to be extremely hard on ourselves. If we asked the same questions about South Africa, there is so much we can learn. Pause and consider the measurables – the number of houses constructed and handed over, the number of homes connected to electricity and water, the provision of free basic services, the number of clinics and hospitals built, the number of learners registered in the schooling system, the number of police personnel we employ, or the number of vehicles at their disposal – on all of these counts we score exceedingly well. Or we can take a high level view of the amount we spend on public services, as against what we spend on functions like defence - we are one of the very few countries in the world that spends more on water provision than we do on defence – and we can feel proud as South Africans. Yet, in each of these areas, the quality of the services leaves so much to be desired, and in the consequence the majority of

our people, who are entirely dependent on public services, are denied the joys of the flowers that ought to grow from where the bullets fell.

So we must pause to consider this deficiency.

The objective of our liberation struggle is defined in the Freedom Charter, which Ashley lived and died for and which our late President O R Tambo described as follows:

*The Freedom Charter contains the fundamental perspective of the vast majority of the people of South Africa of the kind of liberation that all of us are fighting for. Hence it is not merely the Freedom Charter of the African National Congress and its allies. Rather it is the Charter of the people of South Africa for liberation....Because it came from the people, it remains still a people's Charter, the one basic political statement of our goals to which all genuinely democratic and patriotic forces of South Africa adhere.*³

³ Oliver Tambo, January 8th Statement 1980

This is not rocket science – the bulk of the Freedom Charter is an expression of ordinary people about their desire for improvements in the quality of their lives, it is a coherent statement that binds us to improve on the quantity and quality of public services. Our Constitution preserves these fruits of struggle by entrenching access to these services in the Bill of Rights.

Now, in order to deliver these services we need a few basic ingredients – firstly, we need policies and we have these in abundance and all of these policies can be tested against those described in the Freedom Charter. Secondly, we need financial resources – as the figures attest, and in a situation where we currently run a budget surplus, the financial resources are clearly not a constraint. Thirdly, we need people, as in public servants – in national and provincial governments we employ 1.3 million public servants and the municipalities together employ roughly 250 000 workers. That gives us a total of roughly 1.6 million workers employed in the provision of public services – in fact, this amounts to

about 20% of all workers in formal employment. But we are clearly not getting a return on investment from this.

One of the key challenges confronting South Africa is human resource development. It has been a central impetus for struggle across all political persuasions since the introduction of Bantu Education in 1954. The Freedom Charter gave full expression through the clause, “The Doors of learning and Culture shall be Opened.” We all understand that the only way to reverse the scourge of unemployment, under-employment and under-development is through education.

This fact is confirmed by the Transformation Audit of our hosts, The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. The 2006 Audit advises, “By 2008/9 South Africa will be spending R 112 billion per year on public provision of education. This amounts to nearly 20 per cent of non-interest expenditure, the largest spending on a single sector, and is over R 26 billion more than the current fiscal year’s allocation.”⁴ Yet the same report warns that “nearly 80 per cent of schools provide

⁴ Transformation Audit 2006, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

education of such poor quality that they constitute a very significant obstacle to social and economic development.”

The report details this fact in numbers by sharing that the matric pass rate last year, as a percentage of the cohort was 35.9% and the Maths Higher Grade pass rate was 2.7%. I submit to you that this is a deep tragedy, compounded by the fact that school education has been constructed in a model that provides for the tightest community control through the establishment of School Governing Bodies.

There are sound developmental reasons why the struggle for education is so important – the core responsibility of education in a democracy is to equip an individual to act and think in the existing situation, while providing him or her with the means to go beyond that situation.

So, let us return to the basic precepts – the delivery of public services is dependent on three ingredients – policy, financial resources and people. We have established that the first two are in place, what exactly is wrong with the third? Might it be that all of our articulation,

those “simple words that even children can understand” was so wrong? Might it be that the expressions that we learnt from the Freedom Charter, that “The Doors of Learning and Culture would be Opened” were so misunderstood? Could it be that we had so convinced our people that Freedom was to be attained in a single day, beyond which there would be magic – and that that day was 27 April 1994, beyond which no further action would be required of us? Or might it be that our words failed to “fall like red hot embers on our people’s souls” and that the people most impervious to the heat of such embers are our educators?

Should we not pause to ask what these abysmal outcomes are about? I have used the example of education, but I could as easily have referred to the provision of healthcare or policing or the construction of communities where once townships existed. But I have used education consciously because it provides such a tangible link between our collective past and future, where our present actions will determine the outcomes. I have used education deliberately, too, because it was so important a site of struggle for the youth in places like Bonteheuwel where the leadership was provided by the young

like Ashley Kriel. But I have also used the example of education because we should all understand that if we fail in this area, we will fail this generation of young people, who will be unable to find employment. And believe me, with a 2,7% pass rate in maths on the higher grade, the 97.3% who did not pass maths on the higher grade will definitely not find either employment or enrolment in tertiary education, and unemployed young people are a risk to all of the gains of our revolution – they find the money and power of gangsterism and drugs too attractive, and thus carry the seeds of counter-revolution.

This example also speaks directly to whether the bullets that slayed Ashley and Anton Fransch, or Christopher Truter, or the victims of the Trojan Horse Massacre, or the Gugulethu Seven or even Robbie Waterwich and Coline Williams were bits of propelled lead that took lives – or whether, as in the words of the poem, they will flower to produce a different future.

In raising this as sharply as I do, I am not trying to absolve the state. Rather, I am asking questions about whether we have the quality of partnership to deliver the developmental outcomes for which so many

sacrificed. A developmental outcome needs at the forefront a developmental state, but it needs strong partnerships with organised communities. Organised communities must ask of our people to remain as engaged as we have always been – we demonstrated our power when we had the state as the enemy; but it also needs a developmental orientation amongst those of our people employed to provide the public services to make a difference. In short, the relationship between the state as employer and those in its employ can never merely be defined by the norms of industrial relations – it has to be focused on the objectives and the outcomes. And we all know what we strive for.

This discussion is about the challenge of continuity in leadership and struggle. Any such discussion would be incomplete without a reference to the struggle for non-racialism. Under apartheid, it was a struggle clearly defined as against the spatial geography of apartheid – we knew and understood that victory would be seized time and again by literally ‘crossing the railway line’. In this province, it appears that the struggle for non-racialism, with a focus on working class solidarity, was best advanced in conditions where the African

National Congress was in opposition. At a governmental level there has been significant slippage and, in general terms, even in 'person-to-person' context, the struggle seems to have been abandoned. The impact of this deficiency on the conscious development of a non-racial, non-sexist democracy is worrisome. Its tardiness speaks to a discontinuity which might be a measure of a consciousness which has either never existed, or has existed in the subconscious only.

Perhaps we need to alter our perspective on what the state should and should not drive – perhaps we, in government, ourselves may have been naïve in believing that the partnership would be automatic. Perhaps we assumed that it would be understood by all as a necessary continuum to lock in the gains of our revolution, and we have been let down. Perhaps we ourselves must focus more strongly on the outcomes we seek and explain continuously that a developmental state must lead more strongly. Perhaps we should drive a consensus about the fact that the developmental state is the very antithesis of a namby-pamby entity with policies and vision but lacking the muscle to drive the changes. Perhaps government must be more prepared to act against its own when people do wrongs,

such as misappropriating the resources meant for development. So yes, perhaps we are at fault for not being sufficiently determined. But if we are at fault, then do not complain when we drive a harder bargain.

Much of what I have said thus far focuses on what we can measure. We should surely also give much more attention to developing a system of values to ensure that “the bullets begin to flower”. We have to do battle with the notion that as a consequence of democracy this country has been atomized into 50 million entities who each must see for themselves. We must guard against the cult of the personality and this terrible drive to get rich by any means necessary.

President Mbeki warned of this in the Nelson Mandela lecture delivered exactly a year ago where he said:

Thus everyday and during every waking hour of our time beyond sleep, the demons embedded in our society, that stalk us at every minute, seem always to beckon each one of us towards a realisable dream and nightmare. With every passing

*second, they advise with rhythmic and hypnotic regularity – get rich! Get rich! Get rich!*⁵

If we succumb to those demons, or if we allow any part of our communities to succumb, we will never be able to provide a growing and shared prosperity for all.

So rather than merely focusing on what is wrong, we must recommit to what we can and must do that is correct. I am persuaded by the words of a Brazilian commentator, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, who writes:

People should be equipped and empowered in such a way that the manner in which they receive their educational and economic equipment leave the greatest range of social and economic life open to experimental reshaping. The practical means of basic human rights rests on an apparent paradox. We make people's basic rights and capabilities secure against the swings of the market and the reversals of politics. We do

⁵ Thabo Mbeki, Nelson Mandela Lecture, Wits University, 20th July 2006

*so, however, in the hope that thus equipped, people may thrive all the more in the midst of innovation and change. We do so, however, in the hope of making the scope for valuable change broader.*⁶

So our responsibility is to give form and life to the relationship between the state and society, to lock in the gains of our struggle and to correct the deficiencies that we have inadequately addressed in the past thirteen years. But, we do so mindful of the fact that our people are disempowered, and without due care the mere existence of a 'friendly state' could potentially further disempower them.

The empowerment of our people can only come through detailed engagement and the principled commitment to plough back into the communities that spawned us. This is no small task – it is the act of bringing the bullets into flower. It calls for a dedication and commitment no less than that which we demonstrated during the events that cost Ashley and so many other young people their lives.

⁶ "What Should the Left propose?" Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Verso 2005

I have an enduring memory of the funeral of Ashley (an event I missed because I was in prison); it is of the battle between our comrades there, many of whom are here with us this evening, and the police, as represented by Dolf Odendaal, for control of the ANC flag that draped the coffin. The comrades secured the flag on that day – and we must commit to securing the flag from this day forward. Our flag is not three bits of cloth sewn together – it is the very embodiment of what drove our action, it is the source of our courage, it is the history of ninety-five years of struggle, moreover it is the repository of the values for which so many laid down their lives. Take it, hoist it, salute it and cherish it – that was the spur to Ashley’s action twenty years ago and it must remain the spur to our actions still. We must in good conscience and in unison declare “in our land, bullets are beginning to flower”.

Thank you.

