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SOUTH AFRICA AT THE CROSSROADS

1987 Canon Collins Annual Memorial Lecture

Delivered by the President of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, 28th May 1987

*The Chairperson,
Your Excellencies,
My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Comrades and Friends,*

It is now almost five years since Canon John Collins passed away. With his departure, many of us lost a dear friend. As a people, we lost a fellow-combatant for justice and liberation, a dependable ally in the struggle to abolish the system of apartheid. Yet, such was the durability of his good works that it was inevitable that they would outlast the short life that is given to us all and thus serve to turn the memory of the man into a material force that will continue to transform the destinies of the living.

As early as 1954, when he visited South Africa, he had the possibility not merely to study the situation as it then was, but more, to understand the nature of the apartheid system. From his assessment at the time, it was clear to him that South Africa, which he described as a 'madhouse', was heading for disaster. Even when some members of his own church within South Africa denounced him for being a foreign, meddling priest, Canon Collins did not waver in his involvement in the struggle against racist domination, precisely because he understood the dementia of this system.

We meet here today to pay a continuing tribute to him. Some of us have come here as his disciples. As such, all we can do is try to reflect on the message he left us, in the hope that we can communicate something of his example so that one or more among us can be inspired to act as he did and thereby contribute their tithe to the banishment of evil.

Canon Collins came into our lives at the inception of the crisis which the imposition of the apartheid system was to bring to the people of South Africa. In 1952 and from 1955 onwards, he intervened in the persisting drama of South African politics to comfort the persecuted and to help save some of the most outstanding representatives of our people from possible death sentences or long terms of imprisonment. He came to our aid not in pity but in solidarity. He stretched out his hand to our people because he saw that what was happening to us was an unacceptable attack against humanity itself. He acted because he could not stand aside.

When the racist regime arrested and charged with high treason 156 leaders of our democratic movement in 1956, it hoped that it would destroy that movement and create a situation in which it would expand and entrench the apartheid system without opposition. John Collins took the side of those on trial, as he had supported the patriots who joined our Campaign in Defiance of Unjust Laws in 1952. His actions carried the message that in the struggle between the forces of democracy and those of racism, there can be no neutrality.

The crisis which was in its early stages when Canon Collins joined us for the emancipation of our people has matured. The septic boil caused by the apartheid system is ready to burst, as the brutally repressive casting which contains the putrefaction of this system ruptures irrevocably and for all time. South Africa is at the crossroads.

It has taken many years of struggle to reach the point at which we are today. In that period, tens of thousands have been killed, injured and imprisoned within South Africa. Thousands of others have suffered a similar fate in Namibia. The rest of Southern Africa has also seen enormous numbers of people die, economies forced to the verge of collapse and social programmes brought to a halt.

Precisely that scale of destruction has only served to confirm the view among the victims of apartheid violence that they dare not give up, but have to fight with everything they can lay their hands on, to end the system that has brought about so much suffering. Above everything else, it is that resolve and determination by millions of people which guarantees the defeat of the Pretoria regime and the liquidation of the apartheid system.

And yet there are those in this country who, unlike John Collins, doubt the certainty of our victory. These calculate that the racist regime is so powerful, and the white minority so steadfast in its commitment to the maintenance of its domination, that the oppressed are condemned to a futile and self-destructive battering at the ramparts of the racist fortress. But, of course, these doubting Thomases also profess an abhorrence for apartheid and declare a desire to see it brought to an end.

These positions have resulted in a policy which amounts to appeasement of the apartheid regime. Of central importance to the logical integrity of this policy is the notion that the Pretoria regime can and must be persuaded to turn itself into its opposite. Accordingly, it is required and expected that the racists should themselves dismantle the oppressive system they have instituted and over which they preside. Thus would we see the miraculous conversion of oppressors into liberators and the consequent transformation of the liberation movement into an irrelevance.

Another important element in this equation is the definition of the essence of the policy that the white minority regime must follow, as repression and reform. In terms of this perspective, it is required that this regime should gradually reform the apartheid system out of existence. To do so, it is considered necessary that the supposed reformers should work their wonders in a situation of stability. Consequently, it is viewed as a *sine qua non* for the abolition of the apartheid system that the forces that are fighting against this system should be kept in check by repressive means.

It therefore seems clear to us that the major Western Powers have not departed from their old positions. According to these, the white minority regime is seen and treated as the defender and guarantor of the perceived interests of these powers. We, on the other hand, are viewed as a threat which must be dealt with in the appropriate manner.

In response to all this, the questions might be posed — what of the fact that the governments of the principal Western Powers have, especially during the last twelve months, entered into direct contact with the ANC? And what of the fact that these governments have repeatedly called on the Pretoria regime to enter into negotiations with everybody concerned, including the ANC?

The Western Powers entered into official contact with the ANC because the argument that they were seeking change by talking exclusively to the Botha regime could no longer be sustained. It had lost credibility. In addition, and as the Commonwealth Eminent Persons' Group understood and reported, it became clear to the Western governments that the majority of our people within South Africa recognised the ANC as their political representative. Hence it was inevitable that, if they were still interested to project themselves as brokers, honest or otherwise, these governments would have to be seen to be talking to the ANC.

However, the decisions taken in the various capitals to relate to the ANC, did not in any way imply that there had been any change of attitude towards our policies, strategy and tactics. It is also obvious to us that in all the discussions we have held, by and large we have failed to move such major Western Powers as the USA, the United Kingdom, and the Federal Republic of Germany, to view the South African situation from the perspective of the oppressed.

On all major questions pertaining to the issues we are discussing, the coincidence of views between the Pretoria regime and the powers that be in most of the West, persists. Where the racists describe us as a communist front, Western governments go so far as to order secret investigations of the ANC to establish the extent of this alleged communist domination.

Pretoria calls on us to renounce violence. The West calls on us to lay down arms. When the sole aggressor in Southern Africa talks about so-called regional security, the Western Powers condemn 'cross-border violence from all sides'. The white minority regime conducts a vigorous campaign against sanctions and is joined in that campaign by the Western Powers.

We can go on *ad infinitum* and speak even about the questions of formulations and terminology. For example, our armed struggle is never that, but is either terrorism or violence. The limpet mines we use are never simply limpet mines, but are either of Soviet or communist origin. On the other hand, the guns and planes that Pretoria uses with such relish are never of British, American, French, Belgian or West German origin, but are mere guns or planes. The conclusions to draw from all this are obvious to all honest people.

It is true that repeated calls have been made on the Botha regime to enter into negotiations with its opponents. However, nothing is said about how this regime will ultimately be brought to the negotiating table. At the end of the day, the call for negotiations turns out to be nothing more than a pious wish. It is not a desire that is translated into policy, accompanied by the necessary measures to ensure that it succeeds as a policy.

With regard to the possibility for negotiations, the Commonwealth Eminent Persons' Group observed correctly that 'the attitude of the South African government was clearly going to be the single most important determining factor'. At the end of their mission the EPG concluded that:

'It is our considered view that, despite appearances and statements to the contrary, the South African government is not yet ready to negotiate ... (for the establishment of a non-racial and representative government) except on its own terms. Those terms, both in regard to objectives and modalities, fall far short of reasonable black expectations and well-accepted democratic norms and principles.'

Later on in its Report the Group re-emphasised these points in the following manner:

'The (government) is in truth not yet prepared to negotiate fundamental change, nor to countenance the creation of genuine democratic structures, nor to face the prospect of the end of white domination and white power in the foreseeable future. Its programme of reform does not end apartheid, but seeks to give it a less inhuman face. Its quest is power-sharing, but without surrendering overall white control.'

Since the attitude of the Pretoria regime is the single most important factor determining the possibility for negotiations, and since that attitude is patently obvious, the test of the genuineness of the call for negotiations must necessarily turn on the willingness of those who make this call to change the attitude of the Pretoria regime towards these negotiations.

It is clear to us, as it was to the EPG and the Commonwealth mini-Summit to which the Group reported, that this cannot be done without pressure. As things stand, the Pretoria regime knows that it can continue to ignore the call for negotiations because the governments of the major Western countries have undertaken, almost as a matter of principle, that they will not act against the racist regime despite its continued failure to respond to the universal demand for an end to the apartheid system and its replacement by a democratic social order.

It was obvious from the very beginning that Sir Geoffrey Howe's mission to South Africa, last year, would not succeed, precisely for the reason that both the British government and the EEC were committed to avoiding any effective sanctions against apartheid South Africa. The experiences of both the EPG and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary underline the central point that what both we and the international community must focus our attention on is action to end the apartheid system. Everything we do should be directed towards this end. We consider that any new international initiative seeking to bring about negotiations would be grossly misplaced and out of tune with reality exactly because the Botha regime is not prepared to address this fundamental question.

Nor indeed will it do to put the onus on the ANC to take such initiatives as it might be claimed would enable negotiations to take place; and neither will it do to fish around for such initiatives. If the key to negotiations were in our hands, we would long have used it to open the door. Such measures as have been proposed for us to adopt, namely, the cessation or suspension of our armed struggle or the unilateral proclamation of a moratorium, will do nothing to bring about negotiations. The Pretoria regime is refusing to negotiate not because there is an armed struggle, but because it is unwilling to give up white minority domination. Once again, it is instructive to look at the observations of the Eminent Persons' Group on these issues. The EPG said:

'To ask the ANC or other parties, all of them far weaker than the government, to renounce violence for all time, here and now, would be to put them in a position of having to rely absolutely on the government's intentions and determination to press through the process of negotiations. It was not a question of whether the Group believed in the sincerity of the South African government, but whether the parties would. It was neither possible nor reasonable to have people forswear the only power available to them should the government walk away from the negotiating table. For the government to attribute all violence to the ANC ... was to overlook a situation in which the structures of society, dominated by a relatively small group of people, were founded upon injustice which inevitably led to violence. In addition, in the light of recent events, the government of South Africa would need to give a firm commitment to desist from further aggression against

neighbouring states.'

On the specific question of the suspension of armed struggle, the EPG stated that 'a prior reduction in the level of violence before the government itself takes specific action in regard to the (Group's proposals) would not be feasible ... A suspension of violence or a commitment to non-violence, if in the government's view the meaning is the same, would obviously in the present context require a commitment to suspend the violence arising from the administration of apartheid'.

Further, in one of its letters to the Pretoria regime, the EPG makes the point that 'the Lancaster House negotiations (on Zimbabwe) continued without the suspension of violence as have many others in situations of conflict'. This is a matter of historical fact with which we are all familiar. It makes no sense that we should be treated as an exception to this general practice.

We also need to reiterate the point that the source of violence in South Africa, Namibia and our region is the apartheid system and the racist regime. What must cease is, in the words of the EPG, the violence that arises from the administration of apartheid. For that to happen, the system of white minority domination must be brought to an end. It seems to us strange reasoning that we, the victims of violence, should be asked to respond to the continued terror of the Pretoria regime against the peoples of Southern Africa by committing ourselves to cease our armed resistance, whether temporarily or permanently.

The Pretoria regime has blocked the path to negotiations. The recent whites-only elections in South Africa have confirmed PW Botha in his view that white South Africa stands with him in his determination to resist all change and further to entrench the apartheid system. The government of the Western countries that awaited the results of this illegitimate electoral process now have their answer. The question we would like to ask is what then are they going to do?

Those who have always been opposed to effective sanctions against racist South Africa are already advancing arguments to justify their old positions. These claim that white South Africa has moved further to the right because of the sanctions that have been imposed. If it has not happened already, it will also be argued that the Botha regime has, as a result, become so strong that it will not be amenable to pressure — that all that can be done is to re-affirm the correctness of the policy of so-called constructive engagement.

All of this will, of course, come as music to the ears of the white supremacists in South Africa. Indeed, they will make certain that their friends state and re-state these arguments. We, on the other hand, are convinced that comprehensive and mandatory sanctions would succeed to break up this white power block by the maintenance of the apartheid system to a level that is unacceptable even for the most devoted adherents of this system. It is certainly our task to realise this objective and to achieve the transfer of power to the people through struggle.

We say that apartheid cannot be reformed but has to be abolished in its entirety. Official Western policy towards South Africa will not change until this correct proposition is accepted, until the example set by Canon Collins is adopted as the only legitimate course open to those who say they want to see an end to apartheid.

This places the Western powers in the position in which they have to choose either to work for the total elimination of the apartheid system or, in fact, to connive at its perpetuation, as they do now. We are, however, certain that sooner or later they will come to realise that there has emerged an alternative democratic power within South Africa, an indigenous product of struggle which holds the future of South Africa in its hands.

The West will then have to decide whether it takes the side of this alternative power and the rest of the anti-colonial and anti-racist forces of the continent of Africa made up of nearly five hundred million people, or whether it ties itself to the doomed course followed by far less than five million Africans of European origin. It is no longer possible to run with the hares and hunt with the hounds.

The alternative power in our country is as real today as it is impossible to vanquish in the future. It is here to stay and will grow in strength despite all efforts to suppress it, until South Africa is liberated and peace returns to Southern Africa. As a consequence of this development, it is becoming impossible to avoid confronting the question of the legitimacy of the powers which are contending with each other within our country. These two cannot co-exist, as fascism and democracy could not, but have to give way one to the other.

Not even the best of conjurers can maintain an equidistant position between them. The times demand that you who are gathered in this hall should progress from opposition to apartheid to identification with and support for the democratic movement for national liberation in Namibia and South Africa. This evolution can no longer be avoided.

The broad perspectives of our country's democratic power are spelt out in the Freedom Charter. Organisationally, it is represented by many formations which recognise the leading role of the ANC in the struggle for a united, democratic and non-racial South Africa. Whether or not they support or engage in armed struggle, they are at one with us in seeking this outcome and are active in the struggle for its realisation.

I should state here that when we say we are fighting for a united, democratic and non-racial South Africa, we mean what we say. It is very clear to us that unless our country becomes such an entity, we shall know no peace. To propose any so-called solutions which fall within the parameters of the apartheid system is no more than to prepare a recipe for a continuation of the conflict which has already claimed too many lives.

It is to ask for the continued murder and imprisonment of children, which has become a permanent feature of Pretoria's policy of repression. It is to prepare for the extension of the policy of the deliberate impoverishment of the masses of the black people, the forced removal and banishment of millions, the break-up of families and everything else that you know about the apartheid system.

As long as this system exists, whatever guise it assumes, so long will the Front Line and neighbouring states be victims of aggression and destabilisation. For all this to end, for these crimes to become a thing of the past, South Africa must become a democratic country, with guaranteed liberties for all citizens, with equal rights for everybody regardless of colour, race or sex.

Given the changing balance of strength in our country and the shift of the strategic initiative into our hands, there is a sense in which the apartheid forces are becoming the opposition to the ascendant democratic movement rather than the other way round. The recent white elections demonstrate this point inasmuch as the Botha regime contested them on the specific platform of opposition to the ANC. Subsequent to its victory, this regime has not changed its tune but has continued with its threats to act vigorously against the democratic movement and has actually carried out these threats as well as murdered a young Zimbabwean woman who was married to the Administrative Secretary in our Office in Harare.

In the recent period intense debates have arisen about the academic and cultural boycotts. In a critical sense these debates arise from the successes of our all-round struggle and reflect attempts to get to grips with new dimensions that the emergence of the alternative democratic power entails.

The boycott campaigns, from their inception in the late Fifties, were aimed at the total isolation of apartheid South Africa. This objective is inviolate and needs to be pursued with even greater vigour.

At the same time we must take into account the changes that have taken place over time. In particular, as in almost every other field of human endeavour in South Africa, there has emerged a definable alternative democratic culture — the people's culture permeated with and giving expression to the deepest aspirations of our people in struggle, immersed in democratic and enduring human values.

This is a development, however, that is taking place within the context of the emergent alternative democratic power whose duty it is to draw on the academic and cultural resources and heritage of the world community to advance the democratic perspective in our country. For it is only with the realisation of a non-racial, democratic and united South Africa that such a people's culture shall be able to flourish in full glory.

To a lesser or greater degree, there has always been a tradition of progressive culture which has struggled for survival and growth against colonial domination and commercialisation. The change that has occurred is that this people's culture, despite the extreme hostility of the racist state, has grown into a mighty stream, distinct from and in opposition to the warped and moribund culture of racism. Its foremost exponents are today part of the democratic movement. The core of the cultural workers engaged in creating this people's culture are simultaneously engaged in developing our own institutions and structures which are aligned to mass democratic organisations in our country.

As in politics, trade unionism, education, sport, religion and many other fields, these developments at the cultural level both contributed to and are part of the emergent alternative democratic power at whose head stands the ANC.

Without doubt the developing and vibrant culture of our people in struggle and its structures need to be supported, strengthened and enhanced. In the same way as apartheid South Africa is being increasingly isolated internationally, within South Africa this people's culture is steadily isolating the intellectual and cultural apologists of apartheid.

Indeed, the moment is upon us when we shall have to deal with the alternative structures that our people have created and are creating through struggle and sacrifice, as the genuine representatives of these masses in all fields of human activity. Not only should these not be boycotted, but more, they should be supported, encouraged and treated as the democratic counterparts within South Africa of similar institutions and organisations internationally. This means that the ANC, the broad democratic movement in its various formations within South Africa, and the international solidarity movement need to act together.

On these questions John Collins entertained no doubts whatsoever. Having taken positions against racism, discrimination, oppression and war, he accepted that to bring these to an end he must march side by side with those of like mind, against the racists, the oppressors and the war-mongers. His example is eminently worthy of emulation.

Everywhere in our country, and after a year of national state of emergency, the democratic forces are at work to expand and strengthen their ranks and to raise the level and intensity of the offensive against the apartheid regime to new heights. For its part, this regime prepares itself for more atrocities, for the campaign of repression of which PW Botha boasts — as though to shoot and kill children, to imprison and torture them and their parents, to carry out one outrage after another against independent Africa, were the worst activities that one could ever imagine.

A terrible collision between ourselves and our opponents is inevitable. Many battles will be fought and many lives will be lost throughout our region. In preparation for this, the Pretoria regime has identified the defeat of the democratic movement as the centrepiece of state policy. Yet the outcome is not in doubt. Having reached the crossroads, the masses of our people have decided that our country must advance as rapidly as possible to the situation where they, black and white, will govern themselves together as equals. Whatever the cost, there is no doubt that we will win.

We cannot but regret that such titans of our struggle as John Collins will not be with us to celebrate the birth of democracy in our country. In a fortnight you, who are his compatriots, will be casting your votes to choose representatives to your parliament. How terrible it is that in the Southern tip of Africa millions have to go through the furnace of violent struggle to win for themselves a right which you take for granted!

What a tragedy that many more will have to die simply because this, a democratic country, refused to heed Canon Collins's plea for his motherland to side with the oppressed and to declare war on the tyrants! What a tragedy that those who exercise power have become so bereft of vision that they have learnt to treat as no more than a slogan, the objective of the expansion of the frontiers of democracy to the black oppressed of Namibia and South Africa!

When freedom comes, what will they say then?

What will they do then?

Will they finally claim Canon Collins as one of their own?

Thank you.