

Oliver Tambo was a thinker and a 'natural democrat', writes **Dougie Oakes**

ON SUNDAY, March 27, 1960, two men set off on a perilous 1 400km journey by car from Cape Town to Johannesburg.

It was six days after the massacre of 69 people in the East Rand township of Sharpeville and the security apparatus of the apartheid state was ruthlessly wielding its weapons of suppression against opponents of National Party policies.

One man was black, the other white.

One was a reckless critic of apartheid. The other a deep thinker and careful planner.

Oliver Tambo was the driver of the vehicle – the chauffeur. He was dressed in a white uniform, cap and gloves. With him was Ronald Segal, the editor of Africa South, a liberal journal.

One of the new generation of ANC members, Tambo's instruction was to flee South Africa in anticipation of a post-Sharpeville crackdown by the apartheid authorities and to set up an ANC "mission in exile".

After a quick goodbye to his wife, Adelaide, and children, Thembi and Dali, in the East Rand township of Wattville, he set off on his journey. The almost four-hour drive to the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland went without incident.

A young journalist named Frene Ginwala was the organiser-in-chief of his journey out of the protectorate. It involved organising travel documents for him via the Indian consul in Kenya and by the time these came, Tambo had touched down in Malawi and flown to Tanganyika and Tunisia, before travelling to Rome.

The ANC's new "roving ambassador" was ready to begin his mission for a non-racial, democratic South Africa.

Tambo was one of a group of ANC members who, through the formation of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL), had dragged a reluctant and moribund parent body into a new era where action to the point of breaking apartheid laws would have to take precedence over petitions and delegations to move South Africa's black people in the direction of freedom.

The youth league's manifesto, compiled by, among others, Anton Lembede, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Peter Mda, Jordan Ngubane and Tambo, showed the typical optimism of young blacks.

"Africa's cause must triumph," it declared in big, bold capital letters. And it added: "We believe that the national liberation of Africans will be achieved by Africans themselves... We believe in the unity

of all Africans, from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the Indian and Atlantic oceans in the south... and that Africans must speak with one voice."

But in setting up his "mission in exile", Tambo quickly realised that if apartheid were to be defeated, help would be needed from many sources in many countries.

He quickly showed his major strength was his ability to resolve different – and, often, difficult – problems faced by the organisation.

Initially seen as uncharismatic and overly conservative, he proved to have an analytical mind and the ability to see and understand other points of view within the ANC – especially the ANC in exile.

Thus, Albie Sachs described him as a "natural democrat". Brigitte Mabandla was enchanted by his ability to see men and women as equals.

Jacob Zuma admired his "rural wisdom". And Jonas Gwangwa was impressed by his love of music.

But even with these diplomatic skills, he faced a difficult task.

In the beginning, Tambo's biggest problem was the disinterest of big Western powers, most notably the UK and US.

When the ANC started an armed struggle against the apartheid regime, both the UK and the US condemned the organisation as a tool of communism and the then-Soviet Union.

In the 1980s, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher described the ANC as "a typical terrorist organisation".

Realising he was in for the long haul, Tambo showed exemplary patience in explaining the ANC's position on issues such as violence and the South African economy.

In 1982, responding to a question about the ANC's relationship with the Soviet Union, Tambo said: "The Soviet Union has no influence on the ANC any more than Canada has. What has really happened is that we found ourselves, decades ago, fighting against racism and relatively weak.

"We went in search of friends, to Canada, the United States, Europe, India and elsewhere. Some received us well. Some were lukewarm. Some turned us down.

"The Soviet Union gave support. So did other countries – Sweden, for example. Sweden gave us assistance without strings, except that no funds may be used to buy guns.

"The Soviet Union does not have to say that because it gives us the guns. The supposed stigma of getting assistance



Trucks transport coffins to the graves of victims of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre.

'We asked whites to join us'

from the Soviet Union has no meaning whatsoever in southern Africa.

"There would be no assistance for anyone without these weapons. That's what ordinary people think. Where would we be without that assistance? Could we go to Washington?"

But ordinary South Africans were given very little information about the struggles of Tambo and the banned ANC in exile.

And then, in November 1985, Tambo suddenly appeared on the front page of the Cape Times newspaper.

Its editor, Tony Heard, trav-

elled to London to conduct an interview with the ANC leader – and published it, much to the chagrin of its proprietors. He was sacked soon afterwards.

Readers of the Cape Times were provided with an intriguing insight into the thinking of Tambo.

One of the major issues for South Africans, fed an almost daily reading and watching diet of "rooi gevaar", was the ANC's relationship with Communism.

"It is true that the ANC has members of the Communist Party," Tambo said. "There has been an overlapping of mem-

bership from the beginning.

"But ANC members who are also members of the Communist Party make a very clear distinction between these two independent bodies," he said.

"We co-operate a lot, the ANC is accepted by the Communist Party as leading the struggle. There is absolute loyalty to that position. It is often suggested that the ANC is controlled by the Communists. That has never been true.

"As for the charge that we are controlled by the Soviet Union, that is also propaganda. There is a lot of exaggeration about terrorism," he said.



Former ANC president Oliver Tambo, centre, with Nelson Mandela and Adelaide Tambo at the 48th ANC conference in January 1991.

PICTURE: SUNDAY TRIBUNE ARCHIVES

Questioned about what future he saw for whites in South Africa, he said: "All of us in the ANC have always considered that whites, like ourselves, belong to our country. We took the earliest opportunity to dispel the notion that we were fighting to drive the whites out. We have asked whites to join us in the struggle to get rid of the tensions that come with the apartheid system."

Not everything that Tambo

did met with the approval of his allies overseas.

In 1990, he returned to South Africa after 30 years in exile and, surprisingly, called for the ANC's sanction policies to be re-evaluated.

The British Anti-Apartheid Movement leader, Trevor Huddleston, immediately voiced his disagreement and instead called for sanctions to be maintained.

Labour MP and Anti-Apart-

heid Movement member Bob Hughes backed Huddleston. He warned that there should not be a "too hasty" acceptance of the process towards democracy.

He said it would be difficult to sustain any new action against the apartheid government if sanctions were relaxed – and it would be very difficult to reimpose them.

But his warning was ignored.

Authentic conversations with Oliver Tambo and other Struggle heroes

DHIRU SONI

PRESIDENT Nelson Mandela uttered these famous words during his memorable inauguration of a new democratic South Africa: "...As a government, the ANC will create a legal framework that will assist, rather than impede, the awesome task of reconstruction and development of our battered society.

"While we are and shall remain fully committed to the spirit of a government of national unity, we are determined to initiate and bring about the change that our mandate from the people demands. We speak as fellow citizens to heal the wounds of the past with the intent of constructing a new order based on justice for all".

This historic speech came as a beacon of hope to millions of South Africans who had been seared in the flames of socio-political injustice. It promised a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their agonising lives under one of the most pernicious regimes.

But 23 years later, the promised transformation has been derailed. Twenty-three years later, the basic tenets of our democracy and constitution have been seriously violated. Twenty-three years later, the

majority of our population is still marginalised and inequalities have grown wider.

Twenty-three years later, the majority of our population is still poverty stricken in the midst of a relatively new elitist ocean (both black and white) of material prosperity. Twenty-three years later, the spectrum of colours that made up our rainbow nation cannot hold and is falling apart.

Twenty-three years later, minorities by virtue of their colour are being marginalised and their contribution to the Struggle is being rubbished by a new brigade of black acolytes. Twenty-three years later, our country is in serious trouble and is being weighed down by corruption, rent-seeking, a lack of service delivery, and a kleptocracy comprised largely of cronies who dance to the tune of their master's voice.

Instead of writing an open letter to our current "leadership" which invariably never begets a response, I am seeking divine intervention to convey an incorporeal message to Oliver Tambo and other fallen Struggle heroes such as Mandela, Ruth First, Ahmed Kathrada, Walter and Albertina Sisulu, Chris Hani and Joe Slovo (to name a few) to inform them about the shameful con-

dition of our country under the present leadership which unashamedly continues to rule for self-interest and divides the nation in myriad ways.

That the promise of reconstruction and development of our battered country has been betrayed by these same nefarious marauders who choose to loot the nation's assets, as well as budgets set aside for housing, health care, schools, clinics, education, infrastructure, safety, job and food security and school feeding programmes.

Dear Honourable Mr Oliver Tambo and other Fallen Heroes, I know it's your time to rest eternally, but in exasperation and hopefulness I request your revered guidance and celestial intervention in righting the dreadful harm that has befallen our beloved South Africa.

As wise architects of our hard won democracy and the crafters of a magnificent constitution, you signed a promissory note in which you pledged that every citizen would become the heir to a rising phoenix – the new South Africa.

This note was a promise that all citizens would be offered a better quality of life and social justice. Given the malaise of contemporary South Africa, it is obvious today that your successors in leadership



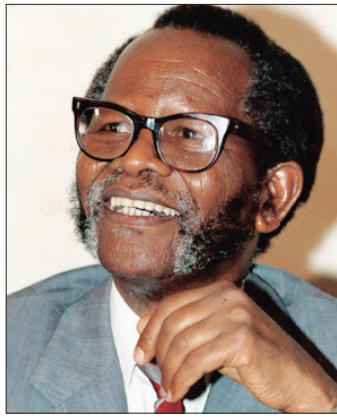
People eat food distributed after President Jacob Zuma's visit to a poor whites settlement in Pretoria-west to address issues of service delivery. The writer says our country is in serious trouble and is being weighed down by lack of service delivery.



RUTH FIRST



ALBERTINA SISULU



OLIVER TAMBO

have defaulted on your promissory note.

Instead of honouring this sacred obligation, the present leadership repeatedly gives its citizens bad cheques, which have come back, marked "insufficient funds".

But I refuse to believe that

the "bank" of South Africa is bankrupt. I refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, I have through divine intervention requested that you cash this cheque, a cheque that will give all its citizens upon demand

the right to the treasures of our beloved country – a better quality of life and social justice.

While I do not wish to continuously bemoan the current malady, I refuse to believe that South Africa does not have a will to develop. I refuse to believe that we do not have servant lead-

ers who can salvage the mess we are in and lead us to the promised land.

I have hope. It is a hope deeply rooted in the belief that the majority of South Africans are full of promise and wish the best for the future of their country and children.

I have hope that with your intervention and a guiding moral compass the country has the capacity and competence to chart a new future for all its people. I have hope that your mission to reduce inequalities and poverty will be reinstated and once again become a bearing point for our development trajectory, which will be devoid of rampant corruption, state capture, cronyism and discrimination.

I have hope that one day in the not too distant future citizens will be able to walk freely without fear of crime; that education will be free; that our children will not have to go to bed hungry; that national affordable health-care will be readily available; that the nation will be properly housed and the citizenry will be at peace with itself.

I have hope that your struggle for a better South Africa shall not be in vain. I have hope that your confidence in South Africa's humanity will not be blemished by a few "dirty drops" in the nation's contemporary polity. I have hope that your well-wishes, we will be able to hew out of the benchmarks of despair a new mission of hope. With this new found faith, South Africans will be able to transform the rattling discords

of the current political malaise into a beautiful symphony of respect for all. With this hope, we will be able to work together, to experiment together, to design, build, create, perform together, to stand up for democracy together, knowing full well that our future bodies well.

Yours in anticipation...

While the above missive is an imaginary one, it does embody an authentic conversation about the wretched state of South Africa. In reality, we do make things true by what we say – things and people are what we call them. We are what we say and others are what we say about them. As much as conversations are so commonplace in our lives, we never pause to contemplate their inherent power.

South Africa requires much more in terms of these authentic conversations. First, conversations reveal what we see in the world and what meaning we attach to what we see. Second, through conversations we name things and create reality and thirdly we invite others to see what we see and the way we see it. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is through conversations that we either sustain or change the meaning of what we see.

And so, unless you have a direct line or an "app" to our revered fallen heroes, I suggest that we all begin these authentic conversations in our homes, in our schools, in our playgrounds, in our halls and wherever we can meet as a concerned civic society to positively chart a new future for the country and all who live in it. We owe it to our children.

● Soni writes in his personal capacity