



## “When a liberation movement becomes a barrier to liberation – what next?” - *John Minto*

*Dennis Brutus Memorial address – 20 minutes (2,800 words) – Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 5.30pm South Africa time (3.30am Friday 24<sup>th</sup> June NZ time)*

**E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā hau e whā, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.**

I'm going to talk a little bit about 1976 because it's a year where South Africa, New Zealand, colonialism, apartheid and Dennis Brutus intersected.



I feel honoured to be giving this address in Dennis's name and want to thank the organisers for the opportunity and privilege to do so. Dennis was always one of my heroes.

I didn't meet Dennis Brutus until 2009 when I made my only trip to South Africa. It was such a pleasure to meet this elder statesman of anti-apartheid activism, with his dramatic shock of white hair, and undimmed passion for justice.

I was envious of his hair I have to say – for obvious reasons!

I'm going to talk about what I think we need to do when a liberation movement becomes a barrier to liberation. But to set the context I'm going to talk a little bit about 1976 because it's a year where South Africa, New Zealand, colonialism, apartheid and Dennis Brutus intersected.

In fact I first became aware of Dennis's name in 1976 at the time of the Montreal Olympics when he was working hard with others in the anti-apartheid struggle. Unfortunately at the time, this colonial country of New Zealand was standing with our "kith and kin" in white South Africa and a government minister had farewelled the All Blacks touring apartheid South Africa by saying the team went with "the goodwill and blessing" of the New Zealand government.

In fact to the fury of most of the world our All Blacks were playing the Springboks during the

Soweto uprising – which had its 46<sup>th</sup> anniversary last week. Black school children were being murdered in the streets of South Africa in their hundreds (600 black children were killed between 16 June and the end of the year) while the All Blacks entertained the supporters of the white regime.

Earlier that same year our Prime Minister Rob Muldoon had castigated Abraham Ordia, the President of the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa and refused to meet him when Ordia came to New Zealand. Muldoon infamously said "Ordia can stew in his own juice". After this insult Ordia left New Zealand early and the follow up played out in Montreal later in the year where African countries tried to have New Zealand excluded from the games.

When the motion to have New Zealand thrown out of the games was lost, 29 African and Caribbean countries boycotted the games because New Zealand was there.

There was an immediate sequel to this decision which is important to remember.

The glamour event of those games was to be the 1500 metres with Filbert Bayi from Tanzania facing John Walker from New Zealand. But Tanzania joined the boycott and a front-page photo in newspapers here showed Filbert Bayi packing his bags in his room at the Olympic village to head home. Bayi said he supported the decision of his country to boycott because the freedom of black South Africans was more important than his personal desire to win an Olympic medal.

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Needless to say, John Walker won the 1500m run.

The most important observation however is that Filbert Bayi's sporting integrity is not so common today in elite professional sport dominated by contracts, money and greed rather than the selfless human solidarity expressed by the Tanzanian runner. Over the past several decades I have been a strong critic of the African National Congress and its failure to transform the South African economy to one that works for people rather than big business monopolies.

In the 28 years since the ANC was elected to power in South Africa the rich have got richer and the poor have continued to struggle.

Two weeks ago I was reading about ANC leader and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa and allegations of corruption around his reputed \$450 million in personal wealth and I immediately thought of a dinner I attended as a guest of an African state in the early 1980s. It was in part as acknowledgement for the work of the anti-apartheid movement during the Springbok tour protests of 1981 which had such an impact at home and, although we didn't know it at the time, an important impact in South Africa.

As an aside here, because there are students attending. In 1981 Nelson Mandela was in prison on Robben Island and told us later that when the prisoners heard we had stopped the Hamilton game they rattled their cell doors right around the prison and made a hell of a racket. He said "it was like the sun came out".

It was a lunch at a flash restaurant on a boat moored in the Thames River in London. I was taken aback with these diplomats ordering hugely expensive French wines and discussing how their children were getting on at flash private English boarding schools. Needless to say back in their home country education for the majority was rudimentary at best and life opportunities limited.

The "justification" was that this is what white politicians did so why shouldn't black politicians do the same? They saw it as racism to criticise their egregious behaviour.

I see and sense the same attitudes in the ANC leadership today.

However nothing sums up the ANC today better than the single word – Marikana. 34 striking mineworkers were massacred by South African police at Marikana. Ramaphosa was on the Lonmin mining company Board of Directors and instead of arguing for mediation and negotiation – he urged determined police action against the mineworkers. He sided with wealthy shareholders against the workers.

Marikana was the ANC's Sharpeville massacre and Ramaphosa was a key perpetrator. Over 40 years he has morphed from mineworkers champion under apartheid in the 1980s to liberation leader, to collaborator, to sell-out, to apologist, to brutal oppressor.

The ANC's transition from liberation movement to guardian of the rich is now complete. Ramaphosa himself has a reputed \$450 million fortune. Let's be honest here – no-one ever gets half a billion by their own efforts – it can only be done either through legalised theft – or just plain theft – there is no other way.

So how did this transition from liberation movement to corrupt government take place?

I think two things are important here.

Firstly the "turning" of the ANC leadership away from its core principles and values. The Americans have an expression for how this is done – they call it "elite-packing". It refers to a strategy of targeting the top officials in a group you want to turn and lavishing them with luxury while working to convince them that free market economics is the only way forward.

So the leading figures in the ANC were targeted in this way with free trips to attend economics seminars in the US to be followed by all expenses paid holidays in flash resorts in Florida or the Caribbean where they were wined and dined. They became "packed" with top US officials and quickly ended up slavishly following US dictates about the free-market economic direction the ANC must follow.

Secondly, most activists tell me they were looking the other way when South Africa's fate was decided in the early 1990s – before the first vote was cast. Activists were campaigning to prevent various attempts by the white minority to screw the scrum in favour of whites by undermining the negotiations around the constitution.

Meanwhile a small group of ANC leaders around Thabo Mbeke were meeting regularly with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and giving them assurances free-market capitalism would be the backbone of the South African economy under the ANC.

The problem for the people of South Africa was that they put their trust and faith in the ANC leadership – trust which was rapidly betrayed.

Black South Africans have gained civil and political rights but oppression based on race has morphed into oppression based on class – and not much else has changed.

Can the ANC be reformed to become a liberation movement once more? No.

Even if the majority of members wanted this to happen it couldn't. It's simply not possible to reform such an organisation from within. I can't think of any precedents which would encourage such a belief.

Blind loyalty will always be a barrier to liberation.

What about the Economic Freedom fighters? Do they offer a way forward? No. They are also tied in with loyalty to personality and their political programme, from what I have seen, has been patchy, inconsistent and incoherent.

So an alternative movement needs to emerge where loyalty is entrusted to a political programme which transcends the vagaries of personality-led leadership.

I'm not usually one for quoting other people but here is a very helpful quote from Che Guervara.

**“Liberators do not exist. It is the peoples who liberate themselves”**

I interpret the message here to be that loyalty to each other and loyalty to a political programme is the way forward – not loyalty to leaders.

Where the movement becomes more important than its political programme or when loyalty to leadership takes over from the drive to enact political policies to benefit the majority – the seeds of political failure have been sown and fertilised.

Many of us, myself included, are veterans of political movements of one kind or other and we know how difficult it can be to develop and drive a movement based around a political programme.

So how does South Africa move forward? It would be arrogant of me to tell South Africans what they should be doing but South Africa has at least two examples from its political history and current practice worth looking at in this context.

The “Freedom Charter” movement of the 1950s was a successful attempt to develop loyalty to a set of political principles on which the liberation struggle could be built. The ANC was an outlawed organisation at the time and this was an attempt to build political opposition to apartheid with a set of political principles at the focus.

However, the Charter with its radical principles was gradually side lined as the ANC developed strength around the personality of Nelson Mandela – a great liberation leader but when elected President was unable to develop and press forward a political programme to significantly improve the lives of most black South Africans.

The other example is the basic organising work being done by Abahlali baseMjondolo – the shack dwellers movement. They are taking people from where they are – not from where they want them to be, or where they think they should be – but from where they are facing the struggle to meet their basic necessities in life.

The wrong way is to come up with a blueprint and tell people this is the way forward. The blueprint has to be developed by people on the ground themselves. It also has to be based around the actual situation people find themselves in – and the words must come from them

with all their pathos and passion.

None of this is easy – if it was we would all be living in a socialist utopia by now.

There are no middle-class saviours for the poor and oppressed in a free-market capitalist society but all of us have talents and gifts to help amplify a political struggle and build a movement which transcends any one organisation and pushes ahead through linking up, sharing experiences, arguing, debating and discussing. In this way we build that wider movement and bring strength, integrity and people power to the fore.

In the meantime the ANC will slowly wither away, but like a whale carcass the decay will take a long time and it won't be pretty.

And as it loses support and begins to collapse in on itself the leadership will resort to the tried and true tactics of race baiting – just as Mugabe did in Zimbabwe.

Through it all the movement needs to grow stronger, personalities taking second place to goals, principles and strategies. A liberation movement learns from its component organisations and brings forward ideas and develops programmes to deal with the big global issues like climate change, human rights abuses and the endless wars to promote free-market capitalism.

I hope these observations and suggestions will provide some food for thought. I know they exercised Dennis's mind when I met him in 2009. The struggle was his life.

I want to finish with a short poem – the very first poem by Dennis in the book called “Poets to the People” edited by Barry Feinberg in 1974. It's a poem which had a big influence on me for the power of its words to convey political messages through righteous anger.

Ironically the book this poem comes from is dedicated “To South Africa's political prisoners and to the African National Congress and its allies”. Dennis would have had plenty to say about that!

#### **For a dead African**

**(John Nangoza Jebe – shot by police in the Good Friday procession in Port Elizabeth 1956)**

**We have no heroes and no wars  
Only victims of a sickly state  
Succumbing to the variegated sores  
That flower under lashing rains of hate  
We have no battles and no fights  
For history to record with trite remark  
Only captives killed on eyeless nights  
And accidentally dyings in the dark  
Yet when the roll of those who died  
To free our land is called, without surprise  
these nameless unarmed ones will stand beside  
the warriors who secured the final prize**

Thank you for listening, thank you for having me.

Kia ora koutou.

## THE NEED FOR ANOTHER 1976

**June 16 is celebrated as “Youth Day” in South Africa, in commemoration of the “class of ‘76” which (it is generally agreed) ushered in the beginning-of-the-end of apartheid in this country. There is an onus on the progressive left to ensure that Youth Day does not lose its political content. We must not allow this momentous historical event to be expropriated by the rulers, as appears to have happened with the project to decolonise the (university) curriculum. Today, “Decolonisation” has become a tamed project “owned” by the university authorities to structure in a way that suits the status quo, bearing little resemblance to the wave of student protest action and their radical demands in 2015. Thus, the curriculum will be decolonised in a way that doesn’t threaten the capitalist order.**

We must ensure that June 16 ALWAYS threatens the capitalist order. June 16 should be commemorated as a date when the youth delivered a body blow of historical significance to the capitalist system. Our young people – in increasing numbers – should know that 1994 represents a betrayal of the freedom struggle, that it ushered in the neoliberal order which so intensified the immiseration of the working class. The ANC and all those groupings who negotiated the hand-over of power at CODESA were collaborators and sell-outs.

It is almost 30 years since 1994. Our state president, who is a multi-billionaire, has just voted himself a pay increase to bring his annual salary to a whopping R3 million-plus. This same state president deals in cattle. We have recently learned that \$4 million in cash (approximately R60 million) was stolen in 2020 from a farm he owns in Limpopo. He is just one of the beneficiaries of the system of rule which was inaugurated in 1994. Not only have senior politicians of all stripes scored handsomely from retaining (and safeguarding) capitalism in South Africa, but so has Big Business. One example: We are informed by an article in Daily Maverick, is that

African Rainbow Minerals (ARM) “founded by business tycoon Patrice Motsepe (who happens to be Cyril Ramaphosa’s brother-in-law) saw its headline earnings for the year to 30 June 2021 shoot up 136% to just over R13-billion or R66.80 per share. A final dividend of R22 per share was declared, bringing the total dividend for the year to R30 a share, making it the latest mining company to deliver for its shareholders.”

Motsepe’s net worth is estimated at \$2.7 billion – a cool R40 billion-plus.

There is an elite group of politicians, business owners, shareholders and senior government officials in this country who have an ABSOLUTE INTEREST in maintaining and perpetuating the capitalist system. To them it is of secondary importance that the unemployment rate is hovering around 34%, and that millions of our people are living in poverty, that the educational and healthcare systems are in crisis, and that service delivery (including the provision of housing, sanitation, electrification, etc) continues to worsen for the vast majority of people – that is, for the poor. And that indicators of social distress such as the high crime rate and xenophobia are out of control.

*Their* interests and *our* interests are diametrically opposed.

The working masses of the world face the stark choice of socialism or barbarism. With the speed at which global society is rushing towards ecological breakdown, with the threat of nuclear annihilation once again becoming palpable, with the warning that pandemics are likely to become a norm going forward, time is not on our side.

One of the many challenges which faces the progressive left as it seeks to foster the growth of a working class consciousness and a united force for socialism is the propaganda put out there by the pro-capitalist media, that global warming can be solved within and by the capitalist system – that capitalism will innovate us out of the problem. Another challenge facing us (and not only us in South Africa) is the lingering scourge of racism, whose liberal face is Identity Politics. Identity Politics attempts to naturalise the notion that racial or ethnic identity matters more than simply being human. In its unbridled form, it leads inevitably to fascism, where the in-group’s highest mission becomes extermination of the out-group.

The politicization of the youth needs to be fast-tracked. They are heirs to this troubled present reality. Part of our political philosophy must be “where there’s youth there’s hope.”

A further cause for hope should be the sheer size and pivotal position of the global working class. In his book, *Climate Change as Class War*, Matthew Huber estimates that the global working class “constitutes 63 percent of the employed population and 75 percent of society if we include those doing unpaid care work.” (2022: 38) He draws attention to the enormous potential which an organised workforce has to disrupt capitalist production.

But mobilising this potential towards the overthrow of capitalism is the central challenge facing all those who would strive for socialism over barbarism.

It is by no means a facile exercise to look back on the 1970s for inspiration. It should be remembered that what has become known as the “Durban Strikes of 1973” and the “Soweto Uprising of 1976” were instrumental in bringing down the apartheid order. The time has come for a united, democratic workers and students movement focused on regaining the momentum which was lost in 1994, and on carrying the struggle through to a genuine socialist, people’s democracy.



## JUNE 16 A HUMDRUM AFFAIR

June 16 has become just another public holiday. The monotonous political speeches churned out by boring ANC hacks, lack content and are merely geared to keep the ruling elite in power. The only “political holiday” that elicited any form of interest was on Workers’ Day when the president, Cyril Ramaphosa, had to be whisked away as angry workers booed and disrupted his address at the COSATU rally. This was after a delay of five hours as organisers tried to fill the empty seats at the Royal Bafokeng stadium in Rustenburg. Cosatu President Zingiswa Losi and SACP General-Secretary Blade Nzimande were also scheduled to speak. On 16 June, celebrations took place in a tent.

*Was this to avoid a possible embarrassment of a recurrence of the Workers’ Day event?*

Workers are beginning to realise that the ANC had been great on promises but less so on delivery.

When thinking of 16 June and “Youth Month”, we are reminded of George Botha who was the first person to die in detention after the tragic events of June 1976. Botha was a teacher at Paterson High School and a member of the *Non-European Unity Movement*. He was arrested at school on 10 December and never seen again by his family, comrades and friends. On 15 December, his wife Pralene was callously informed that he was no more.

Some would say that 1976 was the start of the National Democratic Revolution, others would state unequivocally that there was no fundamental social change and that a mere regime change had taken place. For the latter, the country has been liberated from an apartheid nightmare to a neo-liberal hell-on-earth. SA has consistently been declared the most unequal society in the world. We are characterised by mass unemployment, driving poverty, lack of decent housing (as shown by the recent floods in Durban and Cape Town), outmoded sanitation, rising crime and corruption, failed healthcare and education systems and other social injustices. Discrimination based on race is still evident despite discriminatory laws being expunged from the statute books.

The students who took to the streets in 1976 to face the apartheid government demanded far more than a change in the education system and some cases even more than mere regime change, they, rebelled against the whole system that oppressed them to lives of poverty and want.

To attain complete emancipation from the yoke of oppression and exploitation, one has to understand the process that spawned the apartheid system. After 1994, in the “*new South Africa*”, it has often been claimed that racism was dead and buried. However, racism (slavery) and capitalist-imperialism are two sides of the same coin. Cheap labour was always the motivating cause for racism. Apartheid was not accidental but a manifestation of the machinations of capitalism-imperialism. As such, it will remain until capitalism-imperialism is eradicated.

of the problem. President Ramaphosa at the official Youth Day celebrations in Mthatha stated that the apartheid legacy that left the challenges of unemployment, inequality and poverty was at the root This is

not only the words of Ramaphosa but also the mantra of the ANC. However, the evils of unemployment, inequality and poverty is a product of capitalism-imperialism.

South Africa's inflation rate escalated to 6.5% in May. This from 5.9% in April, The rise in the inflation rate breached the upper limit of the central bank's target 6%.

What does this mean for the poor? Fuel had increased by more than 29% from a year earlier, with transport costs increasing by almost 15%. This includes paraffin the lifeblood for the poor. Food prices escalated with cooking oil increasing by approximately 40% over a year. Already, approximately half (49,2%) of the adult population were living below the upper-bound poverty line. The country is teetering on the brink of a catastrophe.

June 16<sup>th</sup> is celebrated as Youth Day, but what do the youth have to celebrate? It is estimated that half the children who start out in school never make it to matric. Despite the heroic contributions to the struggle for liberation made by the youth, education standards remain debased and this is reflected in the permanent crisis in the township schools. In particular, unemployment continues to burden the youth with nearly two-thirds or 64.4% of those aged 15 to 24 unemployed and 42.9% of those aged 25 to 34 unemployed.

Since the abolition of Apartheid laws and the acceptance of a new constitution, many schools are still understaffed and under-resourced resulting in poor performance and under-achievement by many students. Yet, if they can afford to attend better resourced and staffed schools with superior sport and cultural facilities, achievement is markedly improved. It is thus clear that in South Africa there is a system that provides education for the rich and another which provides for the poor. The provision of poor education goes hand in glove with impoverished living circumstances and the lack of basic services and amenities.

## What is to be done?

Is the answer to vote for this or that political party? Should we petition government to spend more on poverty-relief programmes? What about taking to the streets in our masses? Or should we engage in a campaign of targeted boycotts?

There is no single, simple answer. The challenge facing young people who are seriously concerned about rescuing their future is to immediately and urgently engage with the issues that are dominating their lives and that are condemning the youth to a future of bleakness, poverty and want.

It has been observed that “*Practice without theory is blind. Theory without practice is sterile. Theory becomes a material force as soon as it is absorbed by the masses.*” Perhaps herein lies a guideline to youth activists. Let’s not blindly race into action without a proper understanding of the conditions which face us. Similarly, let’s not lose ourselves in theorising about our problems without acting to change society. Theory and practice, then, are two sides of the same coin.

Questions which should be engaging our youth today include:

- How do we contribute to the building of a united anti-capitalist movement?
- If 1994 signalled the end of racial discrimination why is society still so obsessed with “race”? If capitalism is the true enemy, should our discourse not shift to one of **class** relations in society? Should we not be pondering on how to build

### Remembering June 16, 1976

*Student Uprising in Soweto*

*They are coming back:*

*through woodsmoke weaving from fires  
and swirls of dust from erratic breezes*

*you will see*

*ghosts are returning*

*ghosts of young men, young women,*

*young boys, young girls,*

*students:*

*and if you look closely*

*you will see*

*many of them have torn flesh*

*have wounds bright with fresh blood:*

*and there is blood in the sands of Soweto*

*the ghosts are coming back*

*past barking police dogs*

*through shifting veils of smoke*

*those who oppose oppression are coming  
back*

*demanding dignity*

*challenging injustice*

*they return to join a new generation*

*they chant:*

*resume the fight, resume the fight,*

*resume the fight*

**Dennis Brutus (Oct 2002)**

working class consciousness and power?

- What is “true” democracy? Is it not “government of the people, by the people, for the people?” If so, then it is as clear as daylight that we are not living in a democracy. How do we change this round?

- The anti-capitalist struggle is a global one. Does this not imply that we need to unite in struggle across national boundaries?

On a day-to-day basis there are many practical things that young people could do.

For one, young people need to read, and read avidly – the classics such as *The Wretched of the Earth*, *Fontamara*, *Animal Farm*, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists...* The list is endless. In the apartheid era young people read as a way of resisting the system, as a defence against the enslavement of their minds. It should be no different now. What is needed above all is independent critical thinking.

The New Unity Movement urges the youth generally to continue to play their historic role as part of the cutting edge of revolutions. Young people should also take and create opportunities to organise – at our schools, in our communities - SRCs, PTSAs, Civics, Cultural Societies, Debating Groups, Sports Clubs, and other structures. We need to instil a culture of democracy, one that respects and enlists the wishes of all. It is ultimately on the basis of mass, nationwide peoples-democracy that we will succeed in taking back the bright future promised by the sacrifices of our forebears in 1976.

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**Address all correspondence to the secretariat PO Box 27561 Greenacres 6057**

**Michael Titus/Michael Steenveld**

**083 225 6329/071 645 1590**

[michaeltitus@vodamail.com/mikesteenfeld2020@gmail.com](mailto:michaeltitus@vodamail.com/mikesteenfeld2020@gmail.com)

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