

Address by Former President Kgalema Motlanthe at the OR and Adelaide Tambo Memorial Lecture, Birchwood Hotel, Boksburg

27 October 2014

Programme Director;
The Tambo Family;
The CEO of the OR and Adelaide Tambo Foundation, Mr Mavuso Msimang;
Councillor Mondli Gungubele, the Mayor of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Council;
Comrades and Friends;
Distinguished Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am privileged to stand here before you today to reflect on the political life of Oliver Reginald Tambo, a universally acknowledged titan of freedom and one of South Africa's most revered leaders of the 20th century.

This year, 2014, marks the 20th anniversary of South Africa's system of democracy. As such the 2014 OR and Adelaide Tambo Memorial lecture could not be occurring at a more historically ideal moment. As we assess the progress the country has made so far in undoing the apartheid legacy as well as fostering nation building, we do so knowing of the Herculean sacrifices that made democracy possible.

We celebrate the 20 years of democracy aware that, as former President Mbeki put it, *'building on what was achieved during the years since 1960, under OR's leadership, we have confirmed the ANC as the unchallenged premier representative of the masses of our people, reflected in the ever-increasing majorities in all our democratic elections since 1994'*.¹

¹ Mbeki, Thabo: Oliver Tambo: 'A great Giant who strode the globe like a Colossus', from a book chapter in the book Oliver Tambo Remembered, edited by Pallo Jordan.

It also means we have the responsibility to the memory of OR Tambo, and a host of other members of the human family who threw in their lot with the oppressed, thus opening themselves up to death, injury, persecution, harassment, imprisonment, house-arrests, banishment and indeed exile.

Many could not have the chance to enjoy the days of their lives, which come but once, having chosen to trade the luxury of indifference for the rugged journey of struggle. Oliver Tambo's life is the epitome of this historical experience.

That OR rose with majesty and monumentality of spirit to measure up to historical exigencies during these defining moments of history through leadership that drew on vintage ANC traditions gives him a place in South Africa's political pantheon.

He did not demand respect. His humble yet inspiring presence invested his person with a rare halo of respectability. Universal consensus within and outside the ANC, nationally and internationally, largely converges on one point: that OR was a model leader.

A closer look at the impact of OR on the course of liberation history reveals a dialectical relationship between the ANC philosophy he had ingested while growing up within its ranks and the sheer force of his individuality.

His political cognition evolved within the cauldron of early 20th century South Africa, where racism as a system of thought had intimately bonded with social fabric.

Growing up within this broader social reality, he responded to given socio-economic and political conditions, which saw him undertake a political Odyssey that would define the rest of his life.

Programme Director;

This gathering, South Africans and indeed the world know about the legendary political life of OR Tambo from many different sources, including his biographies. On the other hand, I have in this address the difficult task of sharing my understanding of the meaning of OR's well-lived political life as it impinged on the liberation struggle.

My aim in this address is, therefore, to try to account for the consequential impact OR's leadership had on the attainment of freedom and democracy in our country. To this end, I see OR's leadership, which has left such a respectable mark on our history, as his abiding memory.

Further, OR's legacy is reflected in the ANC he shaped over a period of thirty years, which ANC, in turn, and as a leading force, successfully executed the liberation struggle. In part, then, South Africa's liberation from racial oppression through the political vehicle of the ANC leadership owes much to the sacrifices of OR, much the same way that it is indebted to the efforts of many others, before and after him.

As his biographer, Luli Callinicos says, *'more than anyone else, OR personified the leadership of the ANC when many of its leaders were in prison, in exile, and when some had been hanged or murdered in police cells. And he served in this capacity with humility, without thought of personal gain, always insisting that it was incorrect to present him as the President of the movement. Without ever wavering, he always argued that he was merely the Acting President of the ANC.'*²

His contribution to South Africa's freedom and system of democracy has to be seen in the context of the notion of political leadership, which he demonstrated in a nascent form during his youth but which came into its own between the years

² Callinicos, Luli: Beyond the Engeli Mountains, p

1960 and 1990. How the history of both the ANC and the country could have turned out under different leadership remains inconceivable.

What we know for a fact is that OR's leadership not only saw the ANC weather the storms of exile but built the ANC into a colossus, respected on the global stage and mortally feared by the apartheid state. When multitudes of youths left the country for exile after the Soweto June 1976 uprisings, they found a political home in the ANC OR had moulded.

This is the ANC OR handed back to the people of our county in 1991, the first elective conference of the ANC in the country since the banning of the organisation in 1960. Indeed, this is the ANC that led the first democratic, post-apartheid South Africa following the historic non-racial national election in April 1994.

Yet I would equally argue that such legacy is denuded of essence and rendered meaningless if the political descendants of OR today fail to continue the philosophy of political leadership he espoused with such clarity.

At all levels, individual, societal, organisational and state, succeeding in the project of rebuilding our nation assumes the same tenets of leadership to which OR and many of his predecessors adhered. Indeed, continuing in OR's leadership model would be the noblest compliment ANC members can pay to his memory today.

Few would gainsay the fact that nothing short of solid leadership could have sustained the ANC during the stormy conditions outside the country.

Even though OR's individual role in the South African revolution becomes particularly distinct on the exile front, there was much that OR did before the banning of the ANC to advance the

course of struggle, which, in turn, prepared him for the rigours of subsequent political experiences outside the country.

As a member of the Youth League, he took part in the historic political transformation of the ANC from its passive outlook to a revolutionary orientation.

Qualitatively then, the ANC morphed from what is called 'Conventional Democracy', which is about aspirations to be represented in the existing political structures, to 'a Revolutionary Democracy', where the oppressed sought the complete overthrow of the regime.

As struggle veteran Professor Ben Turok put it, "*On the one hand there has been what I shall call Conventional Democracy, which is based on a belief in the need to extend the existing parliamentary structures to embrace the black people.*

On the other hand there is a conception of Revolutionary Democracy, which envisages a seizure of power by the oppressed and the creation of a new state structure with a wholly new popular power-base which will give expression to the democratic will of the people as a whole and particularly its black majority".³

In this way we see the impact of OR on the course of events very early on. Essentially, this impact Tambo and members of the ANC Youth League made on the ANC sharpened the sting of political methods against the regime. Internal radicalisation of the ANC palpably set up the momentum that would, more than three decades later, lead to the 1994 democratic breakthrough.

Furthermore, we could never quantify the total impact of OR's legendary activities during the years of exile. History forbids us from the act of speculation and conjecture. Yet, in view of the

³ Turok, Ben: The ANC and the turn to the armed struggle, p28

exceptional circumstances of OR, an observer would have legitimate grounds asking how South African history could have turned out had the leader charged with the responsibility of establishing an external mission been anyone but OR.

No less a figure than Father Trevor Huddleston hit the nail on the head when he reminded us of the historical importance of OR to the achievement of freedom. Father Huddleston writes:

*'It will never be forgotten, for without Oliver Tambo, it is true to say, the African National Congress could not have survived the years and years of repression and exile as it has done. His presidency of the ANC began in exile, but was the fruit of many years as student, schoolmaster and lawyer within the country.'*⁴

Father Huddleston's view resonates with that of many other South Africans, of all description, especially many of those who had the honour to serve in the fight against apartheid dehumanisation.

To speak of comrade OR's contribution to our attainment of freedom as a nation is to engage in an anatomy of the art of leadership. A statesman, revolutionary, legal mind and deeply religious being, OR exercised consummate leadership during the historical period in South Africa which the English philosopher, Thomas Paine, would have had in mind when he said 'these are the times that try men's soul' (ibid).

Throughout the metaphorical wilderness of exile spanning more than 30 years, OR's leadership was the cornerstone that stood between survival of the ANC and the eventual success of our cause on the global stage as envisaged by collective leadership within the country on the one hand and the very real prospect of the ANC disintegrating into nothingness, on the other.

⁴ Reddy, E.S: Oliver Tambo: Apartheid and the International Community (Edited); (citation lifted from preface), 1991.

He and a handful of comrades oversaw the successful rebirth of the ANC under trying conditions of exile, following a period of banning and mass arrests, including its top leadership.

History, in its erratic meanderings, has a way of surfacing some names and submerging others. This would explain the relative obscurity of individuals who, along with OR, performed the ponderous task of rebuilding the ANC from scratch under insufferable exile conditions. These include Dan Tloome, Moses Kotane, JB Marks, Duma Nokwe, Alfred Nzo, Dr Yusuf Dadoo, Kate Molale, Reg September and Johnny Makhathini.

In my view it would be a great disservice to posterity if the relative obscurity of these doyens of our struggle who worked themselves into the ground for the ANC was not dissipated by the glare of history.

This successful rebirth, under enforced exile conditions, saw a resurgent ANC slogging it out with fortitude on an even more challenging global political stage, while still rooted in its historical essence.

By way of an explainer, I also wish to state that South Africa's liberation struggle involved thousands of men and women of all social stations and backgrounds, among whom was a stratum of leadership that has, since the 1912 formation of the ANC, in successive historical periods, rose up to the demands of the age with commendable abilities, within the ever evolving philosophical strictures of the ANC.

Figuratively, these successive historical stages of maturing leadership could be seen as a relay race in which each succeeding participant runs with more pace, grit and grace towards the winning line.

While the win is the aggregate contribution of each runner involved, each would have brought individual strengths to bear on the overall victory of the team, in addition to and within the strategic planning of the team. In this regard, we should be careful to understand the underlying connections of historical sequences, to understand the notion of causality and context, contingency, as well as the complex inter-relationship and interplay between historical stages, which drive the historical process.

The phase in the history of the ANC that saw the emergence of OR, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Anton Lembede, Ashby Mda, Sipho Majombozi, Boy Boy Masekela, William Nkomo and many other young lions that radicalised the ANC was made possible by preceding historical stages.

Whatever our views about these historical stages beginning with the formation of the ANC in 1912, a stage that was itself a culmination of preceding political processes, what is essential for history is that out of the womb of one historical stage comes another. Similarly, South Africa's twenty years of democracy is a historical stage with no legibility until there is an intelligible reading of the anti-apartheid historical period.

OR's historical import is enhanced by this historical perspective, for he continued where individuals before him had left off.

Among such individuals of deep conviction are Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, Walter Rubusana, John Langalibalele Dube, Sefako Mapogo Makgato, Josiah Gumede, Abdulla Abdurahman, David Ivon Jones, T.W. Thibedi, Sydney Bunting, James la Guma, Thomas Mbeki, Johnny Gomas, Albert Nzula, Edwin Thabo Mofutsanyane, Moses Kotane, J.B. Marks, ZK Matthews, Zacchues Richard Mahabane, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Alfred Bitini Xuma, Nkosi John Albert Luthuli, James S.

Moroka and many others whose names may never see the sunshine of historical glory.

Each of these men ran with a baton of history. We know, with the wisdom of hindsight, that without their individual roles, no matter how miniscule in the eyes of some, the trajectory of South Africa's history would not have assumed the direction we know today.

Continuing with this analogy of a long distance relay, OR would have been handed a baton after a number of his competitors had dashed off, leaving him with the huge responsibility to cover lost ground before he could compete on equal footing.

Such an elemental analogy may sound too simplistic to vividly capture the full drama of human history, yet its bare essence is worth noting; that is, each historical period occasioned its own strategic challenges within the overall framework of the liberation struggle, imposing a range of strategic choices in terms of responses on those charged with leadership at the time.

This analogy attempts to illustrate the argument that fate lugged OR with the responsibility to lead the movement during the worst period in its history. In more ways than one OR ascended leadership when events had overtaken the ANC, events such as the banning of the ANC, which unleashed a whole new period marked by insipient political decline, demoralisation and general acquiescence.

With the decimation of core leadership through arrests, imprisonment, banning and mounting waves of repression, the stage of ontological despair was setting in.

His turn in history to run with the baton was unenviable. To his credit, OR, supported by the aforementioned leadership core, would fight back the tide of decline, resurrecting and re-energising the ANC under different exile conditions.

In point of fact the political life of OR is better understood within the historical milieu of his political home, the ANC. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian revolutionary, writes that 'the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'.⁵

More or less this was the internal character of the ANC during OR and his generation's political immersion. It was a historical period when past methods of deputations and attempting to appeal to the moral conscience of the colonial and apartheid power structures proved ineffectual.

In the same breath, it was a period when the ANC did not seem capable of re-attuning its strategies by thinking through new ways of taking the struggle forward. A cul-de-sac was looming. Understandably, the ANC leadership's innovativeness was until then inhibited by the deeply entrenched inherited ethos of deference to authority, belief in the innate goodness of humanity to feel the suffering of others as well as adherence to ineffectual methods of protest.

This mode of thinking could all too easily be faulted and blamed by the 21st century observer with no full idea of the turns and twists of ANC's history as it unfolded within the broader political horizons of the country.

Yet as we have seen above, history is cumulative; one stage could and did actually prepare the ground for the emergence of later stages. Another way of understanding the impact of

⁵ Gramsci, Antonio: Selections from the Prison Notebooks (1971)

history on OR is through the appropriation of the words of Sir Isaac Newton, regarded as the most influential scientist in history. Newton's famous line is that 'if I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants'.⁶

What is true about this statement in the scientific sense is equally true in the political sense. Newton was acknowledging the debt his generation owed to the foundations left by advanced, preceding cultures, including Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece, by virtue of which, their generation could reach further than those societies in terms of scientific achievements.

This is a penetrating observation whose significance transcends time and space. In like manner, OR and his generation were able to build on the foundations left by those giants who had come before.

This enabled him to bridge the spatio-temporal difference in historical conditions between the local realities and those of exile.

In carrying out his external mission, among the priorities to which OR attended was the elevation of the name of comrade Nelson Mandela.

With an eye to the propulsion of South African struggle to a higher level of global consciousness, OR ensured that Nelson Mandela's name occupied a pride of place every time South Africa was under the spotlight. This sustained campaign to elevate the name of Madiba helped put a human face to the South African struggle.

Such was the level of commitment to the cause. It was never all about OR, or the sacrifices he was making. The work he did was for the ANC, aimed at liberation, and he was aware of the presence of other leaders, whether in jail, exile or underground,

⁶ Newton, Isaac: Letter to Robert Hooke (15 February 1676)

inside the country. Leadership for him did not mean personal aggrandisement or self-glory in any way.

His selfless disposition is captured in his 1971 New Year Message, which, in part, says *'We who are free to eat and sleep at will, to write, to speak, to travel as we please; we who are free to make and break a revolution, let us use our comparative freedom, not to perpetuate the misery of those who suffer, nor to give indirect aid to the enemy fight by withholding our contribution.'*⁷

What is remarkable about the character of this amazing leader of our movement was his ability to be content walking in the shadow of comrade Mandela's name, which he was promoting himself. Interestingly, while OR helped turn Mandela into a global icon, he never accepted any rewards in his own name. Rather, it was always in the name of Nelson Mandela or the oppressed people of South Africa.

For the record, we can note with self-satisfaction that when Nelson Mandela stepped out of prison into the presidency of OR's ANC, he continued OR's leadership doctrine seamlessly. More tellingly, in all respects, Madiba lived up to the portraiture of him that OR had sketched to the world.

South Africa owes much of the character of its foreign policy to OR's efforts. OR promoted multilateralism, a terrain with which he was intimately familiar resulting from his peripatetic life. During all these international engagements in addition to foregrounding the release of comrade Nelson Mandela he emphasised the need for world peace and mutual co-operation.

Incrementally, the evolving understanding of the global lie of the land resulting from these international engagements would help incubate current ANC thinking on foreign policy. To OR the struggle for national liberation was by definition 'a struggle for

⁷ Tambo, Oliver: New Year Message 1971

peace and that peace is indivisible. For either there is peace everywhere or there is no peace anywhere'.⁸

The South African struggle was put squarely on the table of the United Nations (UN) by OR, who repeatedly engaged with the UN to keep constant pressure on the apartheid state.

In the Introduction to E.S Reddy's edited book on OR's UN speeches referred to earlier, the writer says 'the addresses of Oliver Tambo before the United Nations are a reflection of his efforts —first as head of the external mission of the ANC and later as its President-General—to mobilise world opinion against apartheid and in favour of the struggle of his people. They are, in fact, landmarks in international action against apartheid'.

It is often forgotten that through his conscious efforts OR produced many cadres modelled on his conception of leadership in the ANC contexts. There are many illustrious leaders who would openly credit OR with their political grooming and development.

Importantly, many of these leaders went on to make a notable contribution towards the advancement of the struggle. Comrades such as Thabo Mbeki, Chris Hani, Pallo Jordan, Mavuso Msimang, Eddie Funde, Basil February, including the June 1976 youth and many more who would testify to the impact OR left on their constitution as wholesome, well-rounded human beings. The values that OR instilled in his comrades remained consistently the same. As well, this whole value system that OR taught was embedded in the existential purpose of the ANC.

OR's leadership never once deviated from the norms that define the philosophical disposition of the ANC. It is all the more remarkable given that while he drew on his knowledge of

⁸ ibid

the ANC, there were, along the way, many unforeseen circumstances attendant to the life of exile for which the ANC could not have sufficiently prepared him.

OR led by example. Indeed, if today or at any one point in the future the ANC is misshapen, it will definitely be in spite of and not because of the legacy of OR. Among his main concerns was the need for probity, transparency, accountability and a shared sense of responsibility. During the 30 years that OR was at the helm of the organisation there has never been a single allegation of misappropriation of funds, corruption or any act that suggests that he sought to enrich himself.

Callinicos reminds us that ‘Oliver Tambo’s life and character are a metaphor of our struggle for freedom and democracy’.⁹

Callinicos is worth quoting at length, for she summarises the historical meaning of OR as only a matured scholar can. She argues that:

‘He played a central role, helping to develop and mature the ANC into an inclusive, democratic African organisation. He was present and active at many key moments of its history, from the conceptualisation and formation of the youth league, the adoption of the 1949 Programme of Action, the widening of the mass base of the ANC in the 1950s, the adoption of the Freedom Charter, to the historic defeat of brutal repressive campaign of the Apartheid regime to destroy our movement, at home and abroad.

He played a central role in shaping the ANC constitution from the 1940s through to the 1980s, which, among other things, placed respect for human rights at the centre of ANC policy. Similarly, Oliver Reginald Tambo masterminded the road map

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of our negotiations, the Harare Declaration in 1989, and the strategic outline and structure of our new democracy'.¹⁰

Programme Director;

One of the commonest traits the ANC has embodied throughout its life is humility, service and sacrifice. In the legions of ANC leaders that walked the earth, Walter Sisulu, ranks among the best cadres who lived to epitomise these values.

Perhaps that is the reason many South Africans are wont to citing the triumvirate names of OR Tambo, Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela. It is almost impossible to think of one and not the other two names.

Historically speaking, we would do well to let our children know that there were once lovely human beings who were ever ready to give up what comforts life held out for the priceless prospect of freedom.

It is true that there was only one Oliver Tambo; yet it is truer that it is possible to honour his memory, faithfully continuing the principled pursuit of the vision he lived for, which he both derived from and shared with his organisation, the ANC.

Oliver Reginald Tambo's name will reverberate through the passage of time as one of the 20th century's exemplars of civilising humanism. Along with those who came before and after him, he succeeded to challenge the nature of given reality. His labours for our freedom finally struck him, leaving him weak and fragile.

Whether or not we can succeed in honouring his memory by emulating his model leadership is a matter better left to posterity for judgement.

¹⁰ ibid

A closer look at the full sweep of history seems to suggest that OR knew he would not live long enough to see the blooming tree of freedom. Yet the certain prospect of foregoing the fruits of his labours did not seem to demotivate him from giving his all under the rubric of freedom.

This is among the most enduring lessons we can learn from OR's life. In sum, his life reflects the Greek proverb that says:

'a society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.'

I thank you for your kind attention.