SA pays tribute to a leader of integrity

Special issue in memory of Ben Turok

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Staff and supporters pay tribute to Ben

Many of our readers will have heard the news of the passing of our editor, Professor Ben Turok, in early December 2019. While Ben was dedicated to all the work of the Institute for African Alternatives, it was New Agenda that he was most passionate about, insisting on the importance of exposing ordinary South Africans to both policy and academic debates.

In this issue, therefore, we pay homage to Ben in two important ways. Firstly, we share with you just a few of the many tributes that have been made to celebrate his life. At a private ceremony in Cape Town, three of Ben’s comrades – Kgalema Motlanthe, Thuli Madonsela and Pallo Jordan – spoke about Ben’s commitment to South Africa, to ethics, non-racialism and economic emancipation. We share their recollections and their location of Ben’s life within the current political context which Ben was so deeply concerned about.

At the same memorial, Ben’s son, Ivan Turok, gave us a chronology of his life from the sports enthusiast at university to the man who had to navigate his way over the border into exile. We share with you the photographs from this presentation along with Ivan’s words. We have also compiled a collection of anecdotes from Ben and people who knew him recounting some of his lesser known experiences. We believe these illustrate the richness of his life.

However, a tribute to Ben that only focuses on a biography of his life and person would not be one he would accept. Ben was ultimately committed to a number of political struggles and the ideas that animated them. As such, in this tribute issue of New Agenda we have also asked comrades and friends to reflect on some of the issues Ben cared about most.

Nimrod Zalk writes about the importance of industrial policy in addressing socio-economic struggles, something he worked closely with Ben on in recent years. Vishnu Padayachee and Robbie van Niekerk draw on their recent book, Shadow of Liberation, to discuss the legacy of economic and social policy within the context of the transition to democracy. This is apt not only because Ben was interviewed extensively for this publication but because the ANC’s decision to change from RDP to GEAR, the circumstances surrounding that and the impact on the South African people was something Ben remained committed to interrogating. Linked to this is the continued threat of austerity economics in South Africa and around the world. Ben was passionately concerned about the dire impacts of this.

As readers of New Agenda will know, Ben recently wrote a number of open letters, signed by numbers of comrades who added their support, to urge the South African government to abandon this approach to fiscal policy.

He was deeply concerned about the dire conditions under which the majority of South African continue to live, and spoke often of the grimness of the informal settlement near his house. His son, Prof Ivan Turok, who is Executive Director at the Human Sciences Research Council and a regular advisor to the United Nations and others on housing development, shared this concern. He writes in this issue about the tendency of housing policy to disengage from economic objectives and disciplines. In his article he argues that it is time that backyard dwelling be given a place within housing policy.

While South Africa was Ben’s home, he was also passionate about the development of Africa. During his life he lived and worked in many African countries, most notably Tanzania and Zambia and, as the name of the institute suggests, he was constantly trying to ensure that South Africans paid more attention to the rest of the continent.

Ben’s passing has left a significant hole at New Agenda and the Institute for African Alternatives. His is not a presence that is easy to replace. However, we remain committed to continuing his legacy as best we can. Ben’s passing has necessitated a period of reflection by IFAA staff and the board about the role of the journal and the institute. We encourage all readers and supporters of New Agenda to share with us what they want from the publication going forward.
Looking back over seven decades of unrelenting struggle, one of Benson’s, Professor Ivan Turok, and three of the most eminent of South African leaders paid tribute at his memorial service held in January at Community House, a collective space built in the 1980s for organizations, trade unions and others engaged in building and defending democracy. Ben’s Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) had offices there for many years and it was a place much loved by Ben. All speakers praised Ben’s past political activities, but at the same time, just as Ben would have had it, their focus remained fixed on the future and the way forward.
An extraordinary life of richness and meaning

By Ivan Turok

Professor Ivan Turok is Executive Director at the HSRC and Honorary Professor at the Universities of Glasgow and Cape Town. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Regional Studies* and Chairperson of the City Planning Commission for Durban. He is an expert adviser to the United Nations, OECD, European Commission and several governments.

Ben Turok was getting old and had been ill before, but he had always bounced back, his son, Professor Ivan Turok, told the gathering at Ben’s memorial service. He said it was therefore a shock to the family, and to many South Africans, when on this occasion ‘he didn’t bounce back’. As much as this was a sad event, the younger Turok made the point that it was also affirming for the family and for all the guests. He said the fact that so many prominent and busy people were there, alongside an extraordinary range of citizens of all ages and backgrounds, reflected the respect that was held for Ben and showed a shared concern for the issues that bothered him most about the state of our country, politics and governance.

**FIRST PHASE OF HIS LIFE**

Ben Turok was born in Latvia in Eastern Europe to Jewish parents, both of whom had fascinating lives of their own. His father was a leather worker and his mother worked in a pharmacy. It was an upright and disciplined family with strong moral and cultural values. They weren’t religious; it was much more about the culture of being Jewish and of ethical principles that governed how they lived their lives. They came...
They were very poor when they arrived here and my grandfather started out trying to sell oranges from a handcart, before graduating to a fish-and-chip shop and then a factory job. They had to start from scratch and lived a pretty precarious existence, but if you were white and worked hard in South Africa at that time there were opportunities for upward mobility. Even though this was the 1930s and the 1940s, the Great Depression and the Second World War, good education and employment opportunities were being generated.

Dad was only seven when he arrived in Cape Town and he adapted well. He enjoyed a conventional, middle class, white childhood. He played rugby, enjoyed body building, mountaineering, rock climbing and general adventure. He hitchhiked around the country and was very active and energetic in his teenage years. It culminated in him going to the University of Cape Town to study land surveying, but rather than that being a springboard to a conventional life, which it is for most people, for Ben going to university had a profoundly transforming effect and it radicalised his outlook significantly. It wasn’t the only influence, but it was important and he became very political. This was the
... with many others, he was charged with treason, which was no trivial matter. They must all have wondered what was in store for them. The trial lasted five years – Can you imagine what that was like living with all the uncertainty and the anxiety. Shortly after that he was convicted of sabotage for planting a bomb. He was one of the first in the movement to go to prison.

THE NEXT PHASE OF HIS LIFE

Political activism dominated his life from then on, and he was threw himself into trying to raise awareness and joining various organisations that were trying to resist the burgeoning of apartheid. He was the secretary of the Congress of Democrats in the Western Cape, and later joined the Cape Provincial Council to represent African interests – he told stories of how unpopular he was among the other councillors, who basically ostracised him because he was representing the other group. He became an organiser for the Congress of the People, which led to him getting involved in the Freedom Charter, and for various reasons he was entrusted with writing the economic clause of the Freedom Charter at the tender age of 28.

During the fifties he became increasingly immersed in the struggle against apartheid. For example, he became a founding member of Umkhonto we Sizwe during this period. This was very dangerous work of course, against a very brutal regime, so it required enormous courage on his part. During the fifties, incredibly, he and my mother Mary managed to start and support a family of three children through this tumultuous period of danger, threat and intense political activity. Somehow they pulled it off and for that, of course, we are eternally grateful.

Before long, however, he was charged with betraying the country as part of the Treason Trial. He was up to all sorts of activities that the authorities didn’t approve of. To be charged with treason was no trivial matter. Those involved must all have worried intently about what was in store for them. The trial lasted five years – can you imagine what it was like living with the constant uncertainty and anxiety. Shortly after that he was convicted of sabotage for planting a bomb. He was one of the first in the movement to go to prison. Of course he denied the offence, but he was sentenced to three years. Lawyers were sure he would get off. The evidence was circumstantial, but he served the full term, including solitary confinement. It was tough on the family, particularly when Mary also got locked up for six months. We were ridiculed at school: “your parents are jail birds”.

Prison must have been very difficult for him, but he said he came out stronger and more resilient. He didn’t regret the experience. But my parents soon heard of plans for both of them to be locked up again, for much longer they expected. The authorities said he got off lightly for planting a bomb. They wanted to put him away for good as they
He was active in the ANC, but not uncritical. He published a critical commentary on the state of the movement in exile which got him into hot water with the ANC because he was raising awkward questions about where the movement was going.

Tanzania was a fantastic experience for us. Nyerere was the President and it was just after independence. We learned Swahili and made many friends in a very hospitable society. Many ANC members in exile were also settling in Dar es Salaam. Tanzania was a very exciting time, with visionary leadership from Nyerere who had a clear vision and philosophy for the country - Ujamaa, or pull together. Dad was heavily involved in land surveying, which was his trade. And he was doing a good job, resettling people from flood-prone areas. It was a very inspiring experience for all of us and we remember it fondly. But schooling was a challenge. Only 2% of children went to secondary school because of the shortage of places, so my folks made a decision, based on our futures, to give up this great experience and go to UK.

We lived in the UK for 20 years. The UK in those days was welcoming. There wasn’t the xenophobia that there is today. Brexit was a long way in the distant future. The UK was pretty supportive to refugees like us. I had eight years of free higher education, as did my brother Neil. That wouldn’t happen today. Dad was editing the ANC journal, Sechaba. He got a job with the Open University and was doing pioneering work on telephone technology and distance learning. He also started doing a lot of teaching and writing about South Africa and development in Africa generally. He was active in the ANC, but not uncritical. He published a critical commentary on the state of the movement in exile which got him into hot water with the ANC because he was raising awkward questions about where it was going. He visited the USSR and began to have...
doubts about the centralised Soviet system on the basis of that visit and the people he spoke to.

Although he had a strong political ideology, he was also open-minded. He set up an NGO, the Institute for African Alternatives in the 1970s and helped to create a network of these centres across Africa. It proved to be a very important initiative in fostering connections between disparate African thinkers and activists. We would meet these impressive intellectuals when they visited London. They were very rich engagements. Ben travelled frequently to Africa. He got bored with the Open University after about seven years and had a three-year stint at the University of Zambia, where he did research, wrote a couple of books and got involved in development in Zambia. This was another uplifting episode in his life.

RETURN TO SOUTH AFRICA

Ben and Mary were among the first ANC exiles to come back to South Africa in 1990 after De Klerk’s famous speech in Parliament. They turned up at the airport without any authorisation. We all had UK passports by that time, and as they entered passport control, red lights flashed on the computer screen and officials sent them off to a dirty, dark room in the depths of the airport and kept them there for four hours while they worked out what to do. They hadn’t expected people to come home so soon. Anyway, to cut a long story short, he met up with old friends, Walter Sisulu and others, and were delighted to be back home after a long absence. Within a few months they moved back permanently and moved IFAA to Joburg.

After the 1994 elections he was appointed to the Gauteng provincial government as the MEC for the Reconstruction and Development Programme. He was committed to getting on with practical action and development. When the RDP office was relocated or year or so later, he moved to parliament to be with Mary and he spent 20 memorable years as an MP. He tried to be a diligent constituency MP by constantly raising pressing local concerns with government officials and ministers. He was active in the Finance Committee and the Trade and Industry Committee in trying to press for progressive economic policies, and he later chaired the Ethics Committee. He kept up his writing and produced a string of provocative books. He was in the ruling party, but he was also able to stand aside from it, to prod it and to criticise it, and to use that difficult space of being in but also challenging it. It wasn’t easy and it was unusual among parliamentarians. We all knew how difficult that is, to maintain your credibility within your party, but also to be independent and objective. He started New Agenda to stimulate debate about policy and where the country was going. He was adamant about not taking things for granted, going beyond ideology and rhetoric, and getting very real and serious about the problems facing the country. He was also passionate about political education and the struggle for ideas in order for ruling party politicians to retain a clear sense of perspective and direction, and not get diverted by material distractions and factionalism.

THREE OVERRIDING CONCERNS

He had three overriding concerns throughout his working life. The economy was his top priority and passion. He was determined to make sure that the real economy was more productive and transformed from a narrow minerals-energy complex and a financialised, extractive system to a broader-based economy with fully-shared prosperity. He talked a lot about the productive potential of South Africa, the incredible natural resources we have, the infrastructure, the human capital, the know-how – and the tremendous possibilities for economic progress.

Inequality was his second big concern of course. He was deeply offended by South Africa’s conspicuous inequality of income and wealth, and the exclusion of the mass of the population from the country’s resources and relative affluence. He couldn’t understand how ANC-run municipalities, provinces and national departments could tolerate squalid informal settlements, homelessness and destitution. He knew that the country’s stark social divides are not sustainable politically or in any other way, and he campaigned to improve the evidence base and quality of public debate about the gap between rich and poor.

And he was passionate about progressive politics. He was fearful of populist politics, captured politics, and elitist politics; always maintaining that it was vital to deepen democracy and encourage mass participation in decision-making. These three elements of the economy, social inequality and the character of politics are intimately connected. Unlike many observers and experts who specialise by focusing on particular dimensions, he tried to understand the relationships between these things. He said we have got to understand how one thing leads to another. It’s an interrelated and complex system that shouldn’t be put into separate compartments. It is systemic inequality we have, and its not going to be tackled by palliative measures and piecemeal initiatives. It requires structural changes to tackle the root causes, not cosmetic schemes and vanity projects.

ADMIRABLE ATTRIBUTES

There are four personal attributes of Ben that I particularly admired and want to leave you with. The first is courage. He always stood up for what he believed in, and he thought we should all have the courage of our convictions, whether it’s planting a bomb or speaking out about sensitive and controversial subjects. He wasn’t scared of rocking the boat or even turning it upside down if
He was one of the first to come back to South Africa. He turned up at the airport without any authorisation. We all had UK passports by that time, and he entered with a UK passport, but there were red lights flashing on the computer screen and passport officials sent them off to a dirty, dark room in the depths of the airport.

necessary. He conceded that he didn’t have answers to many of our complex challenges, but he said we have to raise these thorny issues; we have to get people thinking and talking about them in order to formulate shared solutions to intractable problems.

His second attribute is taking initiatives. He didn’t just want to read, think and talk. He believed you had to do something to make the world a better place. He was a life-long activist in all sorts of ways – he just got on with doing things without prevaricating endlessly. He had tremendous inner confidence to challenge all forms of authority to try and bring about change. He was incredibly dynamic and resourceful. He could be exhausting for the people around him, but he was determined to make a difference and to encourage other people to do so too. IFAA was a vehicle for many of his initiatives, for example, he was trying to build a cohort of student activists and leaders. This was a really important initiative at a crucial time for universities and colleges when he felt that the students could play a more constructive role in the transformation of higher education.

Third, he had an inspiring commitment to profound social values, ethical principles and integrity – literally walking the talk. Through his progressive principles and commitment to doing what was right and just, he rallied others to join or support his cause. With his strong sense of purpose, he was a bit like a pied piper; he inspired many people to follow him, but by offering realistic hopes, not by false promises, fantasies and pipe dreams. He offered people a real prospect of social change and meaningful transformation.

Finally, he had astute instincts. He was able to quickly assess a situation and make a shrewd decision about what action was required. He had sound insight, perceptive intuition and wise judgement. He took a stand on the basis of savvy common sense. I really enjoyed asking for his advice on many occasions, although the answer often wasn’t what I really wanted to hear! He would listen attentively and then reason things through with you. This made him widely respected for his wisdom, humility and sharp advice.

Each of these are formidable attributes in themselves, and certainly a powerful combination for a single person to possess. I think he would have been flattered to hear that the Gauteng Legislature posthumously gave him an award that described him as a ‘legend’. In my mind, I will always think of him as a legend. And I will miss him enormously.
Treason Trial – 1956-1961

Ben Turok, with Nelson Mandela on the left and Kathrada on the right, enjoying a tea break during the protracted Treason Trial. He is looking into the tea leaves in his cup, probably wondering what was in store for him, for them all.
Pictures and captions provided by Prof Ivan Turok
Prison 1962-65

My mom has got these incredible press cuttings which tell of the media’s side of the story. Three months sent to jail and their kids sitting around, wondering what was in store for them.
Problem: Teaching the children to do without them

3 MOTHERS GOING TO FOR SIX MONTHS

Only a few more days... before jail

Four Johannesburg women, three of them mothers of small children, are busy organising

Farewell memorial

Pictures and captions provided by Prof Ivan Turok
Daring escape

This was the map he used for his escape on foot to Botswana. It was incredibly basic. Very bleak. There were very few features. There was a river, a couple of paths. He has got some distances in miles to decide “should I go that way. Or that way?” He hadn’t really planned his route.
Pictures and captions provided by Prof Ivan Turok
The media was really on the ball in those days. 'Turok seen and vanishes', 'Turok believed to be on his way to Zambia', [like] the scarlet pimpernel, 'Turok suddenly appears in Nairobi.'
Farewell memorial

Pictures and captions provided by Prof Ivan Turok
Follow Ben’s lead: ‘The world is crying out for ethical leadership’

By Thuli Madonsela

Advocate Thuli Madonsela is a Professor of law who has had a chair in social justice at Stellenbosch University since January 2018. She is also the founder of the Thuma Foundation for Democracy Leadership and Literacy. She served as the Public Protector of South Africa from October 2009 to October 2016.

Greetings to Mary Turok and the Turok family and my deepest condolences to the whole of South Africa. On the one hand we mourn the passing of one of South Africa’s greatest human beings and impactful leaders. However, we also celebrate a life well lived. It is said that a long life is a blessed life, but I am not sure that all long lives are a blessing. What then is a life that is well lived?

Firstly, every human being wants to belong. We form families and we start our own families because we want to belong. We go to churches, of course because we want to worship God, but also because we want to belong. It might not be a church, it could be Muslim group, it could be a Bahai group, a Jewish group, and so on. We join these groups because we want to belong. We form countries because we want to belong. Humans yearn to belong. I once read that human beings will do just about anything to belong, to stay in the group. That is why young boys will kill to remain in a gang that they desire to belong to. That is why some people might even consider terminating their lives if they feel that they don’t belong.

Why is it so important that people belong? One psychologist suggests that it is a remnant of our genetic coding. In [the first] human settlements there were close-knit groups and everyone had to comply with the rules in order to stay in the group; if you did not comply with the rules you were kicked out. Being kicked out of the group meant death. It meant either being killed by another tribe or by animals or dying due to hunger or loneliness. Therefore, that is why everyone has always wanted to stay in a group. That is why everyone plays along. That is why when I released the Nkandla report, everyone voted with their parties. No one wants to step out of line because everyone wants to belong.

Thanks to Karina Turok who supplied all the photos
He also came from the understanding that he may disagree on some things but can work together on what we do agree ... The basis for moving forward was that we all agree on what South Africa should look like at the end of the tunnel.

So why did somebody like Prof Ben Turok step out of line? I will draw on what I learned from him during our association when we worked on drafting the RDP and my days as Public Protector when he was the Co-Chairperson of the Joint Committee on Ethics and Members’ Interests in parliament. I have also shared with him more recently, in the last three years, working together on social economic inclusion and social justice. One of the first things that I learnt from him is the courage to step out of line.

In his book With My Head Above the Parapet, he outlined the cost of stepping out [of line]. You don’t die, as in primitive society, but there is a social death that comes with stepping out of line. Why then would a person step out of line? In his case, we recall two instances when Prof Ben Turok stepped out of line [with regard to] his group, [the ANC]. Everyone knows of the time he [refused to vote for] the Protection of Information Bill, referred to as the secrecy bill. However, I don’t think that was the main reason he ended up annoying some of his colleagues. I think it was as the Co-Chairperson of Ethics in parliament. I think we suddenly learned, as many people who are enforcers of ethics learn, that there is an unwritten mafia code. Do your work ... but don’t touch the family. When he touched the family [by reporting on the corruption of a fellow ANC member, Minister Dina Pule,] the family fought back. But in his view, it was worth fighting for.

Since his teens he had embarked on a quest for justice, and not justice for some. [He meant] justice for all. I met a very good man yesterday who said he didn’t understand why people expected him to apologise for what he had received during apartheid. He said he had worked hard, was an ordinary worker and never hurt anyone. Prof Turok understood that under apartheid as long as you were white, and worked hard, you were guaranteed social mobility. He also understood that much is expected [from those] to whom much is given. He understood where his parents had come from, running away from their own [experience of] oppression. He wanted a world without oppression, a world where there is justice for all because it is a world based on peace.

So when he conducted one of his great investigations, which led to the disciplining of Minister Pule who eventually had to leave parliament, one of the reasons I think he really did what he believed in was to do with a sense of belonging. How could you belong when you are forced to do [something that] does not resonate with what you believe is right. You can’t belong on the outside when on the inside you are dying; he didn’t want to be the walking dead. I never saw Ben drink, so he probably wasn’t one of those people who liked to drown their sorrows in drink or in some other pathological behaviour. He had to do things that resonated with his soul, he had to do things that resonated with what he believed was right.

I think [that in] stepping out [of line] Prof Turok understood that everything has a cost. Those who would do something, even if it was unethical, in order to stay in the inner circle [may] think that they are avoiding that cost, the cost of being excluded. The truth is that in itself it comes at a cost, a dual cost. First is the cost to your own peace of mind. [Most] people deal with that cost [with] more money, more management of people’s perceptions of them. If I perceive myself to be bad and yet I want to be good, I will invest so much in managing how I am perceived. But what I see in the mirror every day is a person that I don’t like. I see a person who doesn’t do what he or she believes should be done. I think Ben probably didn’t want that. There is a further cost down the line when the truth is discovered. That is when everything comes tumbling down.

The final cost is a cost to the country and beyond. We all want a functional world, but we all have to keep asking ourselves are we part of the problem or are we part of the solution? The problems we have today in our unethical world did not start with the Zuma government. I believe that what happened in state capture had its roots in what we didn’t address in Codesa. It [spread] like wildfire until we noticed that we have a problem. But Ben had always believed that if you believe in something, you must stand for it. He did more than that; he made sure that he influenced the rest of us to think like him and act accordingly. That is called leadership, the art of inspiring and influencing others to think and act in a certain way.

The second lesson I learnt from him is the generosity of sharing space. That goes back to when we collaborated on the RDP. Later, when he investigated the Pule matter, I was Public Protector and I was investigating the same case. He and his colleagues shared information with us and we shared information with them. They brought...
Ben had always believed that if you believe in something, you must stand for it. He made sure that he influenced the rest of us to think like him and act accordingly. That is called leadership.

in the intellectuals of the country and the experts on ethics, including Chapter 9 institutions, and sought their views on the Parliamentary Code of Ethics. One of the things we were going to do arising from a workshop that Prof Turok and his colleagues organised was to develop a country code of ethics. Yet, one of the problems we found was that each institution sets its own ethical standards, and often some of those standards are too low. The idea was to come up with something that is universal, and I think those in government should consider a universal code of conduct that applies to everyone, from the cleaner to the president and from municipality to national government. That is in addition to specific departmental codes and professional codes.

Another area in which we cooperated was economic justice, which is something he felt strongly about. Read about it in many of the books he has written. An area in which I joined him was a roundtable he had on Confronting Inequality held in 2017, and we’ve worked together ever since. We (the Thuma Foundation) have organised various events. He was 90, but he never missed a single event on economic justice and on social justice. One of the contributions that he made was by cooperating with the Institute for Sustainability and Mark Swilling, and we will be distributing copies of the outcomes because he was concerned that as long as there are those who are left behind, democracy is not working for all. And if democracy does not work for all, not everyone has an interest in democracy and we have a problem on our hands.

In August last year, he participated in the National Summit on Social Justice and his ability to collaborate demonstrated an understanding that if somebody knows more than him, his knowledge is not diminished. He also came from the understanding that he may disagree on some things but can work together on what we do agree. I remember at that summit there was a disagreement between him and Premier Zille. Premier Zille was still premier then. The basis for moving forward was that we all agree on what South Africa should look like at the end of the tunnel. Where we disagreed was on what it looks like now. But together we can build the pathways for going ahead.

He had the ability to learn and we can see that in the way he interacted with young people after the Fees Must Fall campaign. He understood that there is a lot that we can teach young people about leadership, but there is also a lot we can learn from young people on issues such as decolonialisation, and so on. He understood young people will be the future and he walked the talk.

He also walked his talk on integrity and, hence, he was prepared to walk away all by himself if his group was not going to go with him. I don’t know of him ever being involved in any scandal.

Darwin said that the species that survives is the fittest and often people make the mistake of thinking that when Darwin spoke about the survival of the fittest, he meant the strongest. The strongest can break. What he referred to was the most adaptable. Ben Turok was someone who was born in 1927 but who was still relevant as a leader to young people in 2019. That is adaptability, that is emotional agility, intellectual agility and social agility and that is something we can all learn from him.

Lastly, we learned from him resilience, [the determination to] carry on and his timeless leadership. Why was his leadership timeless? It was the kind of leadership that is ethical, purpose driven, impact conscious and committed to serve. Now is our time to take the baton and move forward from where he left us. The world is crying out for ethical leadership. The world is crying out for economic and other forms of social justice. He did not betray the challenges of his generation, and every generation has a responsibility, an opportunity, to identify the most pressing challenge of its time. We need to identify ours. I hope we have done so and [that we] do not betray the duty of our generation. I have a sense that we are equal to the task. We will not betray the giants, such as Ben Turok, who gave up everything to get us to where we are. It is our turn now to make sure that we don’t betray ourselves, or the previous generation and, above anything else, we don’t betray future generations from whom we have borrowed this land.
Ben posed the tough questions and did not flinch from the truth

By Pallo Jordan

Pallo Jordan is a South African politician who was a member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC from 1985. He served as a member of cabinet from 1994 until 2009, first as Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting, then Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, and subsequently as Minister of Arts and Culture.

Benny was among a group of immigrants from the Baltic states who settled in South Africa during the 1920s and ’30s, and played a significant role in the liberation movement, specifically within its socialist component.

Because of their singular contribution, their names have become legendary. The names of Ray Alexander Simons, Eli Weinberg, Lazar Bach, Ray Adler and Joe Slovo are among the roll of honour of our struggle. Today I want to add that of Benjamin Turok.

Ben Turok acquired a national political profile during the early 1950s. The Defiance Campaign, which peaked after June 26th 1952, was being wound down and an organised body to mobilise those whites who were committed to democratic change was thought necessary. Founded in 1953, it assumed the name Congress of Democrats (COD) and Ben Turok became its General Secretary.

Coming onto the national political stage at that historic moment, a decade characterised by mass struggles, Benny was deployed to the frontline almost immediately, where he was destined to play a distinguished role till the end of his days.

He became integrally involved in the campaign for the Congress of the People during 1954 and ’55; he played a prominent role at the Kliptown Conference itself in 1955 and is credited with the inclusion of clauses 3 and 4 of the Freedom Charter that refer directly to the economy; he was among the Treason Trial accused in 1956; he served on the small committee that announced the SACP’s underground existence in 1960 and, in 1961, he was among the founding members of Umkhonto weSizwe.

“It’s the economy” became an over-ridden phrase during the Clinton presidency in the USA. Both the supporters and the critics of our democratic government measure its performance on the basis of the economy. Palpable economic disempowerment, that evolved in over three centuries of colonialism and racist oppression, has made the economy the principal area of grievance amongst our people.

While the ANC, as government, has striven to overcome what we inherited from apartheid, it has been constrained by the compromises reached in 1994 and the years that followed. Tough questions have to be posed and a critical self-evaluation is obviously necessary when the ANC administers an economy that has made South Africa one of the most unequal societies on earth; in which job losses are announced on a regular basis; while South African capitalist monopolies are obviously

Thanks to Karina Turok who supplied all the photos
reluctant to invest in the country’s economy; and the worst consequences of poverty can only be addressed through an elaborate welfare system.

Benny was always prepared to pose such tough questions and to engage in the introspection so necessary if we are to respond to the challenges the democratic breakthrough presents us with.

The distance between our present-day circumstance and the promises in the Freedom Charter is self-evident. At the ANC’s 1969 Morogoro Consultative Conference we asserted that the seizure of political power in the absence of economic power would not amount to real liberation.

Since the ANC assumed political office in 1994, Ben Turok has been among those who has consistently sought the answers by interrogating government policy and practice.

The progressive liberatory agenda the ANC in government has pursued through legislative action on gender; workers rights; environmental policies; and a host of interventions has undoubtedly made the South Africa of today a much better place than it was in 1994. But the frequently posed question is: could the ANC have chosen a different path?

Administering a highly racialised colonial capitalist order in the 21st century has proved to be a challenge. An intricate dialectic of race, colour, class and gender, rooted in conquest and dispossession, impacts on every facet of South African society, extending even into our post-apartheid context.

The template on which South African capitalism was built remains largely unchanged. In its baggage, that unaltered template carries all the vices of what we termed “a colonialism of a special type” (CST).

Addressing a mining lekgotla in 2012, then Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe, observed inter alia,

Sadly, mining has remained a prisoner of its apartheid past in its core element of cheap labour sourced through a migrant’s punishing annual work cycle and the social evils associated with that cycle. No amount of employment equity plans and empowerment transactions have ventured to tamper with this.

Ben Turok regarded the elaboration of a developmental path that would result in a decisive break with CST, grow the economy in a manner that would develop our productive forces but also re-configure the racial/class/gender relations bequeathed us by apartheid of absolute importance. The question he incessantly raised was: “Has Government policy successfully addressed that challenge since 1994?”

Compromise was necessary to reach 27th April 1994. But that compromise was not based on our recognition of the legitimacy of claims of the white minority regime. In our case it was a hard-nosed, realistic assessment of the balance of economic and military power that persuaded us to compromise. Necessity imposed compromises that we hoped would assist us to effect a significant shift in that power balance.

And, indeed, under the ANC’s stewardship, limited land reform measures, to protect labour tenants and agricultural workers against
The Mineral-Energy Complex, on which South African capitalism was built, still dominates the economy with many of its colonial features unchanged.

arbitrary evictions and dismissal, were set in place in 1996 and ’97. The Land Bank, which let us recall Louis Botha’s government established in 1912 in anticipation of the 1913 Natives Land Act, was also marginally reformed to make its mission more transformative.

A number of institutional devices, Black Economic Empowerment, Employment Equity and Affirmative Action, were harnessed to ensure orderly change. Modest as these legislative instruments are, they have encountered stiff resistance from those previously advantaged by racism. The main opposition party recently re-affirmed its commitment to oppose them.

Yes, “It is the economy”. And those who dominate and control it, in the last and only example of the future direction of the country. At the Morogoro Consultative Conference the ANC adopted a document that says inter alia:

... our nationalism must not be confused with chauvinism or narrow nationalism of a previous epoch. It must not be confused with the classical drive by an elitist group among the oppressed people to gain ascendancy so that they can replace the oppressor in the exploitation of the masses.

These themes were underscored again in the “Green Book”, produced in 1979:

... in contrast to many old-style nationalist movements in Africa, we believe that there can be no true national liberation without social emancipation.

... To postpone advocacy of this perspective until the first stage of democratic power has been achieved is to risk dominance within our revolution by purely nationalist forces which may see themselves as replacing the white exploiters at the time of the people’s victory.

Ironically, a movement that had the prescience to warn against such developments is having great difficulty in addressing them.

Social justice, a central concern of the liberation movement, was placed on a back burner during the four years of negotiations between 1990 and ’94. Once in political office, many argued that there was no alternative; that it was wiser that South Africa adopts its own structural adjustment programme because the alternative was one imposed by the IMF. The outcome is that there is still a huge social deficit, expressed in the gini co-efficient, the yawning gap between the rich and poor, and highly gendered, racialised poverty.

The old exploiter classes have not been displaced! What tends to happen is the assimilation of the emergent black capitalist classes by the old exploiter classes who never relinquished power. What we are witnessing is the emergence of a property-owning class, from amongst the formerly property-less historically oppressed, who are using their access to state power as their accumulation strategy and path.

This is a typically South African pattern. Control of the state resulted in the “White Economic Empowerment” measures that date back to the Kimberley “Diggers’ Democracy” of the 1870s; the Mines and Works Act of 1911; the Natives Land Act of 1913; the Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923; the Asiatic Land Tenure Act of 1946; the Group Areas Act of 1951 and Job Reservation Act of 1953. The rapacious character of these emergent property-rich class/es emulates that of its white predecessors in every respect. The scandalous conduct testified to in the Zondo Commission is almost an exact re-run of the conduct of the Randlords and the Broederbond tenderpreneurs of a few decades ago.

Consequently, the character of South Africa’s economy remains essentially unchanged. The Mineral-Energy Complex, on which South African capitalism was built, still dominates the economy with many of its colonial features unchanged. The government has also been extremely cautious in its relations with big capital. Important South African corporations are now listed on the London Stock Exchange, disguising them as British corporations.

Regrettably, after 1994, the ANC in government has presided over the emergence of a rapacious black bourgeoisie, determined to mimic their Anglo and Afrikaner predecessors, employing control of the state as a means of capital accumulation.

A crisis of confidence in the ANC’s leadership has found expression in events like Marikana in August 2012; in the loss of key municipalities during 2016 municipal elections – including PE, once regarded as the “Petrograd” of the South African revolution – owing to massive abstention to punish the ANC through the ballot box. Was the outcome better or worse for the people of PE? Are the people of Johannesburg and Tshwane better off under a DA-led coalition? ➞
In historic terms, whatever mistakes it has made and will make, the ANC in government has been attempting to breathe life into what has for the past century been the political agenda and vision of South Africa’s democrats.

The struggle of the peoples of the Third World, whom Franz Fanon dubbed “Wretched of the Earth”, has made impressive gains since the end of World War II. But none of these struggles has yet produced a society in which the quest for freedom has not been compromised for the sake of the struggle for bread. When it assumed political office in 1994, the ANC undertook to pursue these two objectives in tandem. Its performance will be judged on how successfully it navigates that course.

In anticipation of the 1997 ANC elective conference I wrote a discussion paper on “The National Question” wherein I first floated the notion that South Africa’s democratic breakthrough was an “unfinished revolution”; that after April 1994 we had a great deal more than we had previously had, but we had attained less than what we had fought for.

Though our revolution is incomplete, it has wrought impressive socio-political changes. Democracy required at least two basic conditions: an adult suffrage and the repeal of all racist laws that institutionalised racial inequality. It threw open the doors of opportunity formerly barred to black South Africans. The statutory abolition of racism has completely transformed the political culture of our country. The political traditions, principles and values advocated by our liberation movement have become hegemonic in the political culture of our country. The political traditions, principles and values advocated by our liberation movement have become hegemonic in the political culture of our country.

But the societal outcomes racial oppression produced still dominate the lives of millions of our people. Political circumstances and our own tactical reasoning persuaded us to accept less than what we had fought for. We reasoned that democracy would be a significant strategic beach-head for further advance. The ANC alliance was the movement that had a strategy to galvanise social and political forces across class and race to defeat the regime. That is why it dominates South African politics today.

Benny Turok, like many of us who spent time in exile, had the opportunity to observe the lived experience of post-colonialism in both Africa and Asia. His recognition of the centrality of the economy convinced Benny that Africa, and South Africa in particular, needed to define its own developmental path.

The Institute for an African Alternative, which produces the journal New Agenda, was an effort to explore that. To him it was evident that the Soviet model so many African states had attempted to follow was not successful. The IMF and World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Programmes too impoverished developing countries and imposed even greater misery on the common people.

Among ANC members and supporters, MK Veterans and other elements of our revolutionary alliance, there is a profound appreciation of the maladies afflicting our country’s economy. And we are all agreed that to raise the nation’s morale the movement that led this country to freedom itself needs to be renewed.

Benny Turok dedicated the last years of his life to that effort, the renewal of the ANC. Our best tribute to celebrate his life in the struggle would be to keep on fighting.

The Struggle Continues!
’Become like Ben Turok and be on the right side of history’

By Kgalema Motlanthe

Kgalema Motlanthe, the Director of the Board of the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) served as President of South Africa between 25 September 2008 and 9 May 2009, following the resignation of Thabo Mbeki. After the end of his interim presidency, Motlanthe was appointed as Deputy President of South Africa by his successor, Jacob Zuma.

Programme Director, Aunt Mary, Fred, Ivan, Neil, Marc and Karina Turok, esteemed members of the academia, trustees and staff of the Institute for African Alternatives, business leaders, leaders of civil society formations, comrades, ladies and gentlemen.

We are gathered here to express our condolences with Aunt Mary and the Turok family and this occasion leaves one with a deep sense of ambivalence: yes we are here to mourn but we are also here to celebrate a great life.

It is an honour to commemorate, remember and re-examine the life and work of Professor Ben Turok with you today. Through this deep process we are compelled to rethink what it means to live and die for one’s beliefs. Like many of his comrades and like all of us, Professor Ben Turok is at once a product and creator of history. A child of his environment.

Today’s memorial meeting and the moving tributes share the attributes of a man who proved to be nothing less than a great role model. A consistent moral leader of our time, whose lifelong dedication to the fight against oppression and injustice helped deliver freedom to our country.

Comrade Ben Turok was one among many who sacrificed their all to attain liberation and democracy. Many are not with us today, but like them and like many of us here, we have been at the centre of one of the most powerful political dramas the world has ever seen. Turok’s and his generation’s single-minded devotion to the people of Africa collectively shifted the nation and the global community towards human rights and racial equality.

Today’s thorough depiction of Professor Turok, his life and his work, aptly describes a visionary who led us through the vast expanse of political, social and economic struggle. With the Freedom Charter as the road map, he helped navigate the liberation movement towards a struggle based on ethics, sacrifice and intellectualism.

Comrade Ben’s history reminds us not to sink and drown into the political ocean, but to dig our feet into the sand.

Thanks to Karina Turok who supplied all the photos
Ladies and gentlemen, there is an urgent sense of impatience in South Africa, a latent panic and unease that underpins our daily doubt, despair and distress.

This memorial service offers us connections to truths beyond an individual – a reflection of who we are, our wisdom gained and our wisdom lost. A chance to become like Turok and be on the right side of history. When contemplating and appreciating the legacy of a selfless leader we should ask ourselves: “what do we inherit from this hero?”

Within one of Prof Ben Turok's final requests for “a private ceremony, rather than anything official or formal, in view of the present predicament facing the country” is a poignant metaphor for his selfless style of leadership and his approach to activism.

We are exposed to his core values in this single statement and are encouraged to consider the heirloom of great leaders and examine the importance of social inheritance. The intergenerational transmission of Turok's ethics, attitude and actions must be the starting point of appreciating and celebrating the legacy of any hero – this is our inheritance – we are the heirs to the virtues of this revolutionary, thought leader, shepherd of truth and struggle icon.

In this and in many of Turok’s public statements, he asks each and every one of us to re-examine whether what we are fed by the status quo is what we actually need – in true 'Turok-fashion', it is an ongoing criticism of passivity and of corrupt governance. In this, we may also interpret an appeal from Professor Ben Turok for us to challenge our social inheritance not to accept the route that has been selected for us by mounting challenges and the hollowing out of leadership.

Turok believed that government was not doing enough to pursue inclusive economic growth. He believed and understood that we are running out of time and that we need a radical approach to governing South Africa.

Turok’s robust opinions on the economy were shared and echoed at the Inaugural Drakensberg Inclusive Growth Forum in 2018: a gathering of a broad cross section of thought leaders and organisations, including communities; governmental bodies; political groups; trade unions; youth; vulnerable populations; civil society; the international community and the private sector to deliberate on important societal issues and engage in a dialogue.

This Forum’s aim to ignite collaborative action and to address challenges was firmly met by Professor Turok’s potent observations in a panel discussion on stage. His contributions included that: Self-enrichment and a departure from the strong moral values so eloquently captured in the preamble to the Constitution, are at the heart of government’s failure to lead and serve the people of South Africa. His observations highlighted that:

South Africa has not clearly spelled out the economic legacy of apartheid and the inequality of wealth this created which is perpetuated by the continued dominance of the “apartheid profit model”; and that there is unfinished business that has been pushed into the background by the state capture crisis;

He went on to warn that:

More research needs to be done on international institutions and the implications of foreign direct investment generally; and that we do not confront the financial sector players as we should – their policies deny, limit and exclude many citizens from accessing capital.

and hammer with all our might against the waves of despair; to be buoyant and agile in our mindset; and see through the sediment of insidious plots that aim to steer our ship off course.

He reminds us not to divorce ourselves from our ongoing duty to apply our minds, question our motives, audit our successes, and scrutinise, on a granular level, our modes of operation.

Through the eloquent and insightful recounting of Comrade Ben Turok by his family, his son Professor Ivan Turok, Professor Thuli Madonsela and Comrade Pallo Jordan, we grasp an important piece of history and learn what kind of conviction and force drove Ben Turok. History is important because it gives us context and is a foundation for the project of social cohesion.

To learn the lessons of our past, to understand and confront challenges of our present and to have an honest and open dialogue about our collective future, we need to revisit history and humanise what it means to struggle.

As Professor Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, writes in his poem entitled 'The Present Is A Dangerous Place To Live':

“Time will always be Pastpresentfuture is always now. Where then is the life we came to live?”
draws attention to the wide-reaching aspects of this reality. In order to refocus our national priorities and steer our country forward, we need to ask ourselves:

**...this is our inheritance – we are the heirs to the virtues of this revolutionary, thought leader, shepherd of truth and struggle icon.**

Turok’s further calls for alternative ways of economic development urges us to deal specifically with the economic legacy of apartheid and that transformation is inhibited because:

South Africa is oversensitive to the IMF, World Bank, etc. and is reluctant to change to economic policy that is [not] aligned with these organisations for fear that we might lose international respectability.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are in nothing short of a crisis right now. The question of ‘how to rebuild South Africa’ assumes that South Africa has, at one point in its existence, enjoyed the status of a well-constructed and built up society, economy and political sphere. The prolonged destruction that South Africa has been subjected to goes back for generations. This guides us to ask the question whether our country in some way experiences a constant state of being fractured or broken without [an] opportunity to fully construct the South Africa of our dreams.

The last period of troubled years have been dominated by discourse that draws attention to the wide-reaching extent of corruption, dually intersecting in unethical business and political partnerships, crises in Eskom and State-Owned Enterprises, and repeated demonstrations and social upheavals even along historical fault lines of race. We are constantly haunted. The project of social cohesion and nation-building efforts is under continuous threat.

A dedicated commitment must be made across all sectors of society, government, business, civil unions and communities, to invest in a system of opportunity and inclusion for all. This distinct attitude change will offer a concrete basis for the true development and construction of South Africa by providing the power to unlock our potential.

South Africa needs to look beyond our familiar ways of doing business and understand that what has worked in the past is clearly not working today – there is no panacea to our socio-economic problems and to our financial woes.

Ladies and gentlemen, Eskom is South Africa’s top risk. The crisis at Eskom threatens the entire country. The state-owned utility cannot manage to cover its costs and make the huge interest payments on its mountain of debt. Its poorly maintained power plants are struggling to meet demand, and it has lost many CEOs, Board members and highly skilled staff over the years. Eskom can be described as the biggest risk to the country’s economy.

Corruption and mismanagement have induced a brain drain at Eskom and other State-Owned Companies with over-regulation and availability of skills as a top concern. SOCs are not facing one single challenge, but a multiplicity of problems that if not properly diagnosed, [would] allow any turn-around strategy [to] only address symptoms that are on the surface.

Time is not on the side of the South African economy. Its impatient population and a generation of youth counting on us to lay strong foundations for their future attest to this reality. In order to refocus these State-Owned Companies on their growth and developmental functions, the Pan-African Investment and Research Services offered the following recommendations to revive growth with an emphasis on defining a set of programmes and/or feasible interventions where SOCs could work together to create momentum for investments, industrialisation and job creation.

First, there is a need for clear ownership policy that defines the overall rationale for state ownership, the state role in corporate governance of SOEs, and how the government will implement its ownership policy needs to be in place.

Second, there should be constant monitoring and evaluation of these entities, with [the] focus on the manner of their operations, how they deploy capital, and their development effectiveness.

Third, SOEs should justify themselves before the rationale of value-creation for the public, and with clear development impact. Where there is no clear competitive advantage or potential to develop it, and where there is no developmental value yielded, such enterprises should be allowed to die rather than be on an expensive life support.

Fourth, at the minimum, these entities should abide by existing corporate governance norms, including the Companies Act, Public Finance Management Act, and King IV Codes of Good Governance. For this to be possible, boards should be selected on a merit-based system and made up of individuals known not only for tested expertise but also for their integrity and grasp of ethics.

Finally, as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Guidelines on Corporate Governance of SOEs suggest, these entities should have a disclosure policy that identifies what information should be publicly disclosed, and
According to recent findings of the International Labour Organization, Green Economy policies could create around 40 million jobs worldwide in various sectors. Considering the Green Economy as part of our sustainable development path addresses the interdependence between energy production, economic growth, social protection and the natural ecosystem. Within this, the private sector and civil society must play a fundamental role.

These rich endowments of minerals, oil, gas, wind and sun, place South Africa in good stead as potentially becoming a continuing source of economic growth and influence in Africa, the Golden Goose of Africa.

The world’s eyes are on Africa as the next big economic growth story, and it is vitally important to ensure that this growth benefits all Africans – our agility in this ever-changing terrain is a fundamental element in developing modern business strategy.

With South Africa’s economic growth in the spotlight of emerging economies, we are the ideal springboard for the region to not simply be an observer of evolving technologies but to be a globally relevant participant in the 4th Industrial Revolution. Carving a space for public and private sectors to explore and design new workforce systems, we need to assist the workforce to adequately interact with new technologies, actively driving the digital era forward within all sectors.

Our new reality is controlled by digital technology, and access to this technology is a universal human right. Digital inclusion allows people to access the economy, communicate freely, be ready for the jobs of the future, enjoy the rights to education, freedom of expression, health and more. It quickly becomes obvious why digital inclusion is so important and considered a universal human right.

With the acceleration of digital technology driving change in every market sector and the necessity to adapt to these new conditions reaching increasing speeds – we must develop young talent through educational platforms that boost access to technology and develop digital literacy.

Professor Ben Turok rebelled against the pitfalls and traditions of contemporary South African politics and made a move to formulate a new theory of how the world should work. He asked of us to root out and discard anything that, on reflection, results in negative influences to continually test and challenge our existing mindset and to refine and improve it at all times.

In comrade Ben, foresight and rebelliousness are equivalent in imbuing him with a sense of uncanny balance towards life. In his autobiography, “Nothing But The Truth”, he concluded: “Indeed, it may be that throughout my political life in the ANC, I have been driven by ideas rather than practical politics, trying to move the process faster than objective reality allowed.”

In his objective to offer fresh ideas and create a mindset change among leaders, he inspired a movement of innovation and creative problem solving – essential qualities necessary for the 21st century and the energy needed to invent sustainable solutions to the challenges that face our communities.

What Professor Ben Turok has left us with is an inheritance of ideas to assimilate, deliberate and meditate on for many years to come. A legacy of firm and clear-cut guidance that reflects the hopes and dreams contained in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. He and his peers made the ANC the conscience of the nation. They demanded of themselves the highest level of ethics, discipline, intellectualism and sacrifice.

Many thanks go to Aunt Mary and her family for sharing Professor Ben Turok with us and the millions of Africans and South Africans.

Africans and South Africans.

clear processes on obtaining such information. Accountability and transparency should be proactive.

There is the general view that government ownership can have certain advantages such as furthering social outcomes as well as providing physical infrastructure. Yet, it is indicated that it is vital that a value creation approach be followed as it provides a framework when considering whether government should have and/or should retain an ownership stake in an enterprise. Ultimately, enterprises should be maximising value creation as well as profitability.

In addition to the recommendations to revive SOCs, it is important for us to look at alternative methods of driving sustainable and inclusive growth. A sense of leadership during troubled times compels us to think innovatively, venturing out into uncharted waters and bringing into the national fold new ways and eyes of looking into things that in the end drastically changes the lives of the people for the better.

At the 2019 Drakensberg Inclusive Growth Forum, we were left with a positive outlook that focused on South Africa’s existing endowments as an important factor in economic transformation and revival. These include South Africa’s strategic location, the potential of our Oceans Economy and the vast deposit of natural resources as a substantial geographic advantage.

Allow me to refer to the maritime world, the Blue or Oceans Economy, what Commander Tsietsi Mokhele; former SA Maritime Safety Authority CEO, referred to as “South Africa’s 10th Province”. With the discovery of oil on South African shores and South Africa being the only country on the African continent with such an expansive access and control over sea waters from the Atlantic Ocean in the west, to the Southern Ocean, the Antarctic and Indian Ocean in the east, our maritime potential is extensive and the economic benefits are boundless.

Many thanks go to Aunt Mary and her family for sharing Professor Ben Turok with us and the millions of Africans and South Africans.
Biography of an independent, non-racial and committed freedom fighter

By Moira Levy

Moira Levy is the Production Manager of New Agenda, the flagship journal of the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA)

Ben Turok started off his many years as a political exile with an argument. While attempting to cross the Tanzanian border from Kenya where South African exiles were not welcome, with his wife, Mary, and their three young children, a protracted disagreement with a border patrol officer ensued.

It was not Ben's first argument with a policeman, but it had to have been one of the strangest, and possibly the most poignant. It erupted over a single question in the standard immigration form. Everything had been going swimmingly until Ben reached the very last line, which required that he disclose his race. The problem was that his choices were limited. He could tick only “European”, “African” or “Other”. Ben had only to place his tick next to “European”, and the whole family would be granted entry into Tanzania, but he refused.

Ben insisted that he was not a European, he was not from Europe and anyway he was a South African. The policeman pointed to the colour of his children's skin. “White,” he declared. “Therefore, you are European,” he said patiently. Obviously, he had no idea of what he had come up against.

Professor Ben Turok will be remembered for the many roles he played during his 70 years of activism as an underground cadre, a treason trialist, a trade unionist, a (not always successful) saboteur, a political prisoner, an exile, a

Member of Parliament, an academic and, most of all, an independent thinker who always spoke truth to power. This biographic article looks at what underlies Ben's political persona and what shaped him into the man he was.
Ben tossed the officer’s words aside and back and forth they went, apparently for some time, until Ben came up with a compromise. He proposed that next to “Other” he wrote “white African”. The policeman was suitably convinced, the family was somewhat relieved, and Ben was well satisfied.

That was in 1966 and the bemused Tanzanian policeman could not have known that he was one of those who had publicly encountered the essence of Ben Turok. During his 70-year political life, many came to know Ben’s determination in the face of any challenge to his principles, his intellectual persistence when clear thinking and rigorous analysis was required, and his dignity when a satisfactory compromise could be brokered.

Ben recently recounted the story of the Tanzanian border affair to a group of students and academics at the University of the Western Cape during a session on the topic of decolonisation in Africa. Ben felt it a duty to participate in the renewed enthusiasm for Pan-Africanism and self-reliance inspired by the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student movements in the country. He demanded that he too be recognised as an African and a comrade in the struggle against neo-colonial authority. He told his audience: “I could not say I was European. Something stuck in my throat.”

This must have taken some courage – a meeting of that sort could easily have gone awry – but he recognised the importance of the debate, which at that time had our universities seething. Ben was never deterred when faced with a political conundrum, the more complex the better. He was ready to stand his ground, but no one in the lecture hall objected. They listened to Ben’s demand for an end to colonial legacies in South African universities and society.

He bemoaned the turn to structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s, the imitation of European aesthetics and political culture by African states and institutions, and the behaviour and attitudes of South Africans towards the rest of the continent. He concluded: “We have a hell of a lot to do. We have a big anti-colonialism agenda left, and decolonisation should not be mystified into some obscure psychological distortion. It is the reality of a system that is in place and which is doing a lot of damage, everyday and all day.”
Farewell memorial

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT - FROM BUNIDISM TO NON-RACIALISM

Political debate was Ben's natural habitat. In his autobiography he says his parents were "gregarious people", which is a nice way of describing a childhood home always full of opinionated and highly politicised people who loved a good debate, even more so as it got louder. He emerged out of a Bundist home in Tsarist Russia. The Bundists were far left-wing Jews who supported the workers' movement and, for the most part, the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. They rejected Zionism, with its colonial aspirations, and demanded socialism in their country, in their lifetime. That was the environment into which Ben was born. As a boy two additional factors helped mould him into a man who could not tolerate apartheid, or any form of racism and oppression.

Firstly, he grew up experiencing the grim reality of poverty. His was a poor working-class family, living first in Byelorussia and then in the Jewish ghetto of Latvia in a single unheated room. Recession drove his father out of work, and eventually forced him to leave his family and travel all the way by boat to South Africa to seek a way of supporting those back home. He started out selling oranges from a handcart to passers-by. Meanwhile, back in Latvia, Ben's mother supported her three sons by walking door to door selling linen goods, which she carried in two large suitcases. Ben wrote: "We bathed once a week in a tub of hot water heated on an open fire. We ate sparely, the treat of the week being the cake crumbs purchased from the local cake shop."

Second, his experience of fascism and his own intimate encounters with anti-Semitism forever shaped his political attitudes. He never forgot an experience of being stoned by jeering boys taunting him as "Jude! Jude!" (Jew! Jew!) A number of Jewish leftists who fled pogroms in Russia turned up in South Africa where their own experiences drove them into anti-racist and anti-fascist activism. Their experiences in Eastern Europe gave them an ability to identify with South Africa's poor and marginalised majority. It was therefore inevitable that Ben would take up the struggle early on, and keep at it without once letting go, though all its challenges and formulations, to the very end of a long and extraordinary life.

There was, however, within Ben a personal anomaly that he encountered soon after his arrival in South Africa. This contradiction became apparent to him at the age of seven and was to stay with him for the rest of his life, intensifying his political goals and determination. The disparities between black and white South Africans haunted
He never stopped arguing for the South Africa he believed in. For that, this country and its people thank him, and will always remember him.

him from the start. Two pages into his autobiography, reaching back into his childhood memories, he recalls joining the family’s domestic worker, Arabia, seated on the floor, as was expected of her. Ben would often sit on the floor at her side. He recalls how greatly such inequality distressed him. This discomfort never left Ben; nonracialism and a deep-rooted hatred of inequality were the principles upon which his political commitments were constructed.

In his later years he would often refer to the informal settlement of Masiphumelele located not far from his Noordhoek home and the irony of well-off (mostly) white people situated in close proximity to an abjectly poor black community living under appalling conditions without services. That such an injustice could still be found after more than 25 years of democratic government was, to Ben, appalling, unacceptable, incomprehensible.

With knowing foresight, he wrote nearly 20 years ago of a need for white people to rid themselves of “sensations of superiority” and “convert” to non-racialism. Ben believed he had a head start in that, describing himself as being “fortunate in a way – being poor and going to a school that was not too scrupulous about judging the whiteness of skin colour ... No doubt my conversion to non-racialism was greatly assisted by the nature of my origins”.

In his first autobiography, Nothing but the Truth, Ben wrote, “before dealing with the deeper politics of the movement, I feel I must explore our [the ANC’s] origins more fully. We continue to affirm that the ANC has a non-racial vision ... We fought hard and over many years for the legitimacy of non-racialism as a principle and so I want to reflect on how people of such differing origins became part of the same movement”.

In an interview published in New Agenda (issue 64), Ben recalls that it was finally the Treason Trial that brought the movement together as a non-racial force: “The extraordinary thing about the Treason Trial is that there were 156 accused and we were all members of different organisations, from the Indian Congress, the Coloured Congress, the ANC and the Trade Union Congress. Although the prisons were racially segregated, we were all in court together. It was this that cemented the Congress Movement politically. The Congress Movement became a reality in the Treason Trial as a non-racial movement.” As one of the last surviving members of this generation, Ben felt a responsibility to pass on the heritage of non-racialism that was cemented in the movement during the 1950s.

INDEPENDENT THOUGHT

Non-racialism was a principle that Ben developed at an early age, and it resulted in a rebelliousness that remained with him for the rest of his life. His political environment at home, where arguments were conducted in Yiddish and concerned exclusively with Jewishness and the preoccupations of an unassimilated immigrant population still obsessed with pre- and post-revolutionary Russian politics, seemed disconnected from Ben’s growing political concerns: “I began resenting all these old fogies who persistently intruded into our home, squabbling at the tops of their voices about some Jewish issue or other, and which increasingly seemed irrelevant to the world I encountered outside the walls of our home ... As I grew older, I thought the cult of Jewishness futile, representing a fading past, beyond recapture – a lost cause drowning in extravagant sentiment.”

The act of rejecting the orthodoxies of family politics was the first of many statements of independence. He wrote of the experience as “a watershed. It freed me from the confines imposed by a narrow community, from the straitjacket of tradition, and from the restricted horizons of an inherited world view.”

Not only did his new-found independence introduce Ben to the art – later perfected by him – of disregarding authority, dispensing with old world thinking and adopting a determined freedom of thought and action, it was a rebellion that was to serve South Africa well in the dark years ahead.

While the country was squeezed in the grip of apartheid, and the townships caught up in the political turmoil of the 1950s and ’60s, his family’s circumstances steadily improved, and the Cape Town suburbs and seafront offered the option of the comfortable life of a white professional with his new qualification as a town planner. Ben found himself torn between two entirely different, and incompatible, worlds. He admits that it was something of a struggle to shake off the trappings of white privilege, but he had to make a choice.

The world knows that he chose to stay on the right side of history. The rest of his story is by now well known, including his propensity to never miss an opportunity for a good argument, as that Tanzanian border official learned so long ago, as well as his ability to concede defeat if proved wrong, and determination to find a solution to take the matter forward. In more than 70 years Ben never stopped arguing for the South Africa he believed in. For that, this country and its people thank him.
SA pays tribute to a comrade of integrity

By Vishnu Padayachee with Robbie Van Niekerk

Professor Padayachee is currently a Distinguished Professor and Derek Schrier and Cecily Cameron Chair in Development Economics in the School of Economics and Finance at the University of the Witwatersrand. He also holds the position of Life Fellow, Society of Scholars (through the School of Advanced International Studies) at The Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC. Robbie Van Niekerk is the Chair of Public Governance at Wits School of Governance.

The author and co-author Robbie van Niekerk of the recently published Shadow of Liberation: Contestation and Compromise in the Economic and Social Policy of the African National Congress, 1943-1996 points to the role of evidence, good data and solid argument that was determinedly upheld by Turok. They argue that it was exactly this intellectual rigour that was often absent from the multi-party negotiation process, leaving contradictions and lacunae that have contributed to the erosion of the South African democratic process.

Robbie van Niekerk and I published our book, Shadow of Liberation: Contestation and Compromise in the Economic and Social Policy of the African National Congress, 1943-1996 in November 2019. We began our primary research for this project in January 2015 with an interview with Ben Turok at his office, then near parliament, on the 29th January 2015. I am not sure why we started with Ben but I would maintain that we were drawn intuitively to him not only as one of the bearers of the progressive ‘Big Ideas’ that attracted us to the movement as young activists in the early 1980s, but also because he was in fact one of the architects of the iconic Freedom Charter of 1955, one of the great emancipatory statements of our struggle.

We recall our interview and exchange with Ben as lively, engaged and thought-provoking. Here was someone, then approaching 88, who had more than earned his stalwart stripes in all possible senses of the word but did not need to self-proclaim himself as such. Instead he continued to engage actively and with passionate determination on the important strategic political and economic policy issues while others, in often more influential positions in the movement, sank cosily into the tactical silence of political cynicism, a thin veil for their personal self-interest. In an era characterised by an increasing anti-intellectualism and unwillingness to meaningfully debate policy alternatives in the movement, Ben Turok was a breath of fresh air, regardless of whether one agreed or disagreed with any particular position he may have held on strategic policy issues.

For us this was because Turok not only cared passionately about the project to realise the broad vision of the Freedom Charter. He was also fully prepared at all times to try to understand and interpret how the ‘Big Ideas’ embodied in it in the 1950s could be understood and implemented in a very different and constantly evolving global and local context in the 1990s and beyond. The values, principles and strategies that underpinned the Charter (of social solidarity, non-racialism and...
... we were drawn intuitively to [Ben] not only as one of the bearers of the progressive ‘Big Ideas’ that attracted us to the movement as young activists in the early 1980s, but also because he was in fact one of the architects of the iconic Freedom Charter of 1955, one of the great emancipatory statements of our struggle.

Wealth re-distribution in the interests of the masses) were never subjected by him to the vagaries of right-wing shifts in the political times or to neo-liberal fortunes. They remained a lodestar for Turok. While Turok never failed to hold fast to these underlying values and principles that drew millions of South African to take up the struggle against apartheid, he was also a vocal critic nonetheless of his own movement whenever he believed that it too easily, without deliberation, without a proper debate of alternatives, conceded too much ground to its opponents. This is a rare and cherished quality today and it is a point that was well made in that period by Professor Laurence Harris in a prescient article published before the ink had dried in the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) and multi-party negotiations.

[It] is right that received ideas, formulated (but rarely analysed and discussed) in an earlier period, should have been critically evaluated and appraised and it is healthy that the simple slogans of the past have been superseded. But the ‘big ideas’ have been dropped under pressure ... without an informed ... debate, and without the elaboration of effective new .... perspectives.2

Harris, who subsequently became a visiting fellow to the International Monetary Fund and longstanding advisor to the South African Reserve Bank and the National Treasury, raised a number of important points back then which are still relevant today in the context of this tribute to Ben Turok. If anyone was opposed to crass sloganeering of the kind that twitter has facilitated and encouraged, it was Ben Turok. William Gumede in the Sunday Times of 16 February 2020 accurately argued in our view that “the economic policy debate [in South Africa] is often based on slogans”. This was not an accusation that could be thrown at Turok. He insisted always on the importance of evidence, good data and solid argument, and his speeches and publications are a mark of this quality. The last time I met him was at a workshop he convened in Salt River to debate the term (white) ‘monopoly capital’ because he was tired and irritated about the loose manner in which the term was bandied about in South Africa, especially during the Zuma era. Many busy progressive scholars responded to his call – who could say no? and we had a rich and productive day of deep reflection.

Returning to another point in Harris’s observation, Turok was also then, visibly and publicly irritated at the ANC’s uncritical buy-in to TINA, the notion that we had no policy space or alternative, given the nature of the negotiations and the context of those times, but to adopt neo-liberal economic policies. Just as Turok did consistently, we make a strong point in our book about the ANC’s failure to debate policy democratically. Here is what he argued in the Daily Maverick:

There were indeed critical voices which sought to introduce more radical
economic and social policies which were rejected by the top leadership. The RDP was one such voice which was soon closed down on spurious grounds such as budget allocation difficulties. And there were others such as MERG [Macro Economic Research Group]. The main problem seemed to be that the leadership did not have a sense of what economic development meant and how it could be promoted (our emphasis).

This failure to democratically debate economic policy reform is best evidenced by the way in which the new democratic government’s 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme was produced (in secret) and announced (as non-negotiable). This in sharp contrast to the deeply democratic traditions of other local progressive political formations including the mass-based United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which led the production of the seven iterations of the pre-election Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) “base document”. We personally recall RDP meetings in Johannesburg around 1991/93 attended by over 1 000 engaged workers.

Over 30 years ago the post-Keynesian scholar, Hyman Minsky, wrote: “Economic issues must become a serious public matter and the subject of debate if new directions are to be undertaken. Meaningful reforms cannot be put over by an advisory and administrative elite that is itself the architect of the existing situation.”

But that tragically is what unfolded in South Africa in the 1990s and in our view, apart from the obvious importance of policy content itself, this failure of process, is one of the monumental failures of the ANC since the beginning of the negotiations. The ANC shows little or no appetite to change this. Ben Turok’s regular workshops and many popular publications, as well as his scholarly work, showed us another way, a road not taken.

To its credit the ANC delivered a Constitution that appeared to capture the values and spirit of the struggle for freedom and equality. It is peppered with direct and implied commitments to social and economic justice in order to turn around the lives of those millions of Southern Africans who have endured centuries of both economic and political oppression, exploitation, indignity and inequality.

We are decidedly not among the people who cavalierly characterise the 1994 democratic project as merely a sham or sell-out, or as a diversion from some other grand (socialist) project which was still to eventually come as the masses were slaughtered meanwhile by the abhorrent apartheid regime. We don’t fully buy the claims of betrayal, sell-out or conspiracy theories – we argue in “Shadows” that the case remains unproven rather than untrue – but we can fully understand why they are being made, arguably with increasing stridency accompanied in some instances by violence.

We need to acknowledge the triumph of 1994 over a brutal system of racism and continue to recognise its significance to this day, while being aware and drawing attention to what we see as its many limitations. Chief among the latter is the sense of ego, arrogance and supercilious ex-post justifications of every short-sighted decision taken at CODESA and the multi-party talks. There are times when it is necessary to say to our own people, “Yes, here we screwed up, we got something wrong. Instead of sticking to hackneyed neoliberal economic orthodoxies let’s try a different policy route. Let’s try to put things right together.” What we have instead is what appears more and more to ordinary citizens to be a cover up of policy failure, something that has to remain ‘hidden’ and buried, forever.

When ordinary working people, tired of being denied even the dignity of the most basic human services, call in to radio talk shows to express their understandable and growing anger at what transpired at CODESA and beyond into the democratic era, they are met with arrogance and increasingly even with outright lies. We were told recently for example that the Constitution was in fact not debated and agreed to at CODESA but at the Constitutional Assembly (CA), as if none of us can recall the 1994 Interim Constitution, which largely informed the final Constitution that was indeed adopted by the CA in 1996. We are told the fantasy that the idea of the RDP was first mooted by the ANC National Executive Committee, when many of us who were there at the time as grassroots activists will recall engaging the seven draft iterations of this COSATU-led policy document. This same RDP document was ironically only finally adopted against fierce resistance as an ANC manifesto as late as February 1994, and only after Mandela’s persuasive power urging its adoption. Why these lies? Whose interests are being served by attempts at re-writing our struggle history as if it was only made by ‘great men’ in the exiled ANC and not the masses of our grassroots activists, workers, women and youth in the UDF and other progressive trade union and civic formations waging the struggle for national liberation and fundamental social transformation internally in our country (yes, indeed, including for a democratic socialism that many championed as an alternative, as was entirely their legitimate and democratic right)?

Apart from Chris Hani, within that exiled ANC itself few had the revered status or were as avidly read amongst the activists of the Mass Democratic Movement as revolutionary theorist and MK veteran, the late Jabulani ‘Nobleman’...
Nxumalo, known popularly as Comrade Mzala. It was instructive that Mzala as early as 1990, after an ANC memorial service in London, said to a dumb-struck Robbie Van Niekerk, then a grassroots youth activist in the UDF, in the context of the impending negotiations with the apartheid regime: “Comrade, we must be vigilant, though, that we do not create neo-apartheid in South Africa.” That the structures of economic domination established under apartheid could take some entirely new, non-statutory form in the democratic South Africa still to be negotiated was entirely unthinkable at that stage in the ranks of the ANC-aligned Mass Democratic Movement. It was precisely this concern that Ben Turok’s firm intellectual and political gaze on the compromises of the transition kept us alert to: what new political economy and policy direction was being shaped and negotiated to replace that of South African capitalism under apartheid? Was it emancipatory?

Mzala’s cryptic warning points furthermore to the ex-post gloss that was eventually placed over the negotiations process, covering up major blunders and ‘novel’ interpretations of what happened that fly in the face of recorded evidence – many of us who lived through those tumultuous times of legitimate expectation in the 1990s are still very much alive and have not lost our marbles.

No one is being told about what really happened in the cosy and poorly recorded, and even more poorly remembered, ‘bilateral’ between the ANC and the apartheid regime where, as we show in our book, many of the real deals, such as Reserve Bank independence, were struck. Where are the records? Where is the evidence of what went down in the discussions around the now ‘infamous’ sunset clauses? What are we not being told? Why are seasoned researchers not able to come to definitive conclusions?

Crucially, there was no mechanism built into CODESA and multi-party negotiations which linked the fine constitutional principles and values to processes of policy formulation on social and economic policy. As social justice activist Mark Heywood observed in a recent Daily Maverick review of our book:

As a social justice activist and constitutionalist, one of the things I looked for in Shadow of Liberation was evidence that the ANC had tied the constitution-making process to a consideration of economic policy that would advance its objectives. I was disappointed. In fact, as former Deputy Chief Justice Dikgang Moseneke has confirmed in his memoir, My Own Liberator, law-making and economic policy-making followed parallel processes, never crossing each other: ‘The negotiators did not stare in the eye the historical structural inequality in the economy. There was no pact on how to achieve the equality and social justice the constitution promised.’

We would go further and argue that part of the crisis that has overtaken the post-apartheid project lies in the unresolved tensions and contradictions between the social-democratic values embodied in our Constitution and a destructive style of ANC-led governance, characterised by a neo-Stalinist approach to decision-making; and a neo-liberal economic framework where control of the public debt trumps all other considerations including, ironically, growth, employment and redistribution.

Thabo Mbeki’s government’s decision (allegedly) not to fund new generation capacity in Eskom in the early 2000s is one example of this narrow, short-sighted thinking, and we are living with the consequences to this day.

It would perhaps be necessary here to invoke the wise warning of the late Amilcar Cabral. Not only that we “tell no lies and claim no easy victories”, but that we in addition “hide nothing from the masses of our people”, that we “expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures.”

Presciently these observations by Cabral are found in one of the most avidly read and debated books (once clandestinely circulated as it was banned for possession) of grassroots anti-apartheid activists in that time, Revolutionary Thought in the Twentieth Century. The text was edited by Ben Turok. Robbie Van Niekerk shared this with Turok after an interview with him in 2014. He was delighted to hear of this reach of his edited book into the educational activities of grassroots anti-apartheid organisations located in the townships of South Africa.

Comrade Ben, we will miss your boundless energy, your strength, your wisdom, your uncompromising intellectual incisiveness in the interests of the fundamental social transformation of our country; in the interests of the masses and not an elite. Long live the spirit of our comrade professor, Ben Turok!

ENDNOTES


3 Quoted in Rapley, John 2017, Twilight of the Money Gods, Economics as a religion and how it all went wrong. London: Simon Schuster

Socio-economic transformation needs broad-based participation in the economy to benefit all

By Nimrod Zalk

Nimrod Zalk is Industrial Development Policy and Strategy Advisor at the South African Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Prior to this he was Deputy Director-General of the Industrial Development Division of the DTI. He also sits on the board of the South African Industrial Development Corporation.

The author asks what lessons are to be learned from Professor Turok’s long-standing criticism of orthodox economic policies that underpinned post-apartheid economic policy, with its limited investment in productive sectors such as manufacturing. This enabled the widening of already obscene levels of income and wealth inequality while a narrow-based black “national bourgeoisie” became increasingly integrated into the upper echelons of income earners.

My first encounter with Ben Turok’s forthright manner was around a decade ago, as a nervous government official reporting to the parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Trade and Industry. He reached down under the table, pulled out some tinned goods, unceremoniously plonked them down on the table, and demanded to know why tinned tomatoes were being imported when they could be produced in South Africa.

It is only over the last few years that I had the opportunity to collaborate much more closely with Ben, via various workshops and brainstorming sessions that he convened, with the objective of seeking ideas that could contribute to the structural economic and social change necessary to transform South Africa into a thriving and more equitable country, and feeding these ideas into economic policy debates.

Ben had long been critical of the orthodox economic policies that underpinned post-apartheid economic policy from the early 1990s, including unduly restrictive monetary and fiscal policies, de-emphasis of the importance of public investment expenditure and big bang trade liberalisation. This was a matter of principle, not convenience, raised and held without regard to the prevailing political winds that favoured orthodoxy. He accordingly gave short shrift to self-proclaimed radicals and their newly “discovered” outrage at neoliberalism, manifested for instance by populist attacks on the Reserve Bank and associated rhetoric around nationalisation of its ownership. He recognised them for what they were – an attempt at misdirection by those threatened by the anti-corruption drive of the Ramaphosa administration.

He was deeply concerned about the methods and patterns of accumulation in post-apartheid South Africa, which resulted in limited investment in productive sectors such as manufacturing, while enabling the...
[Ben’s] objective [involved] seeking ideas that could contribute to the structural economic and social change necessary to transform South Africa into a thriving and more equitable country.

widening of already obscene levels of income and wealth inequality even as a narrow-based black “national bourgeoisie” has become increasingly integrated into the upper echelons of income earners. For Ben, socio-economic transformation should not be predominantly about a transfer of wealth from one elite to another but rather broad-based participation in the economy in a way that benefits all, most fundamentally through employment and prising open productive opportunities for economic participation.

He never abandoned the principle that the state and state-owned entities should be agents of the type of socio-economic transformation he envisaged. However, he was acutely aware that South Africa’s state-owned corporations were increasingly unfit for this purpose, certainly as long as they remained hijacked to serve the interests of the architects of state capture and while the institutional damage of this legacy persisted. His stance against corruption within parliament and against the grand state capture project that has hamstring so many state-owned corporations was conducted at substantial personal cost, ranging from ostracism to death threats.

Over the last few years Ben became increasingly interested in understanding the workings of the financial sector, capital allocation processes in the South African economy and why they delivered such low levels of fixed investment. He recognised that a “national stalemate” prevailed between the corporate sector and the state and that moving forward required that “persisting conflicting interests have to be identified and mediated”.

He always retained a pan-Africanist perspective, reflecting in part the many years he spent in exile on the continent. He felt that industrialisation was fundamental as a catalyst for the development of the continent. South Africa had a leading, albeit not chauvinistic, role to play in supporting regional industrialisation.

While he held firm to his intellectual and moral positions, he always remained open to a multiplicity of perspectives and voices, including those he didn’t necessarily or fully agree with.

WHAT CAN WE TAKE FROM BEN’S VISION FOR SOUTH AFRICA, AND THE CONTINENT?

Ben found value in the proposition that a fundamental stylized fact about post-apartheid South Africa is that it has been a “high profit, low investment” economy. Post-apartheid corporate restructuring has involved the unbundling of the old multi-sector conglomerates and their reconsolidation in high levels of corporate concentration within more narrowly defined value chains. East Asian countries managed to harness the scale and scope of their large business groups by orienting them to become formidable global competitors in export markets. By contrast South Africa’s business groups, in concert with institutional investors, have focused on exerting their market power in the domestic market and southern African region.

Thus, as data compiled by both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) show, South Africa’s listed firms have persistently been amongst the most profitable amongst peer middle-income economies. Yet South Africa’s fixed investment rate (of which private investment is the largest component) has persistently been amongst the lowest and exports outside of mining and heavy industry have been lacklustre. There is a case to be made that this has resulted in a form of credit rationing in the South African economy, where the hurdle rate for investment projects in tradable sectors such as diversified manufacturing, is raised by the kinds of rents that can be earned directly in concentrated sectors or indirectly through investing in their shares and limited efforts are made to develop these projects.

High levels of contestation over evident rents in the economy are thus unsurprising. However, what is required is a shift from the prevailing battle lines over which elites benefit from harvesting economic rents in the economy, to an emphasis on facilitating a dramatic increase in the rate of productive investment in sectors that can directly and indirectly make rapid inroads into our chronic unemployment problem, while also advancing far greater racial inclusivity in the ownership and economic participation in productive sectors of the economy.

The failure to build a productive and inclusive economy has not only imposed unnecessary hardship on millions of South Africans. It has steadily eroded the public credibility of the governing party and the state on the
Post-apartheid corporate restructuring has involved the unbundling of the old multi-sector conglomerates and their reconsolidation in high levels of corporate concentration.

one hand, and big business on the other. Thus, both face rising discontent, which if not reversed, could manifest as an outright crisis of legitimacy. Indeed the declining credibility of South Africa’s political and economic leadership to deliver, opened the door to self-serving populist rhetoric that undergirded the state capture project and those whose primary objection to it was that they were not included.

Maximalist or absolutist positions are neither helpful nor indeed feasible, whether they are calls for a widespread deregulation of the labour market, large-scale redistribution of assets from one elite to another, or entirely unrealistic calls for “socialism now”. This is because no major locus of either political or economic power can fully impose themselves on the other. They are however capable of, unwittingly or unwittingly, imposing costs on each other, as they have done for at least the last decade, and by extension the country at large as long as a “national stalemate” persists.

Perversely, however, mutual reliance to narrow the social credibility gap gives rise to both the opportunity and imperative to identify and mediate the “persisting conflicting interests” Ben referred to, or risk a further deterioration in economic conditions, corporate profitability and social cohesion.

A significant part of the remedial action required is in repairing and re-orienting the state and state-owned corporations. Reindustrialisation is unimaginable in the absence of the reliable and cost-effective operation of electricity, rail and ports. In the words of sociologist Karl van Holdt, the “class formation” role of the state in securing the large-scale entry of black South Africans into the middle class that they have been historically denied, while necessary, cannot supersede its primary function and obligation to deliver services to its citizens and to support a massive deepening of productive investment in the economy. Re-engineering the state also requires recognising that while large parts have been severely compromised, not all government departments and state institutions have been impaired. This implies for instance, channelling industrial financing through relatively well functioning institutions such as the Industrial Development Corporation, the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the South African Revenue Service (with respect to the administration of tax incentives).

One sign of recognition that there is a mutual need for the corporate sector and the state to work together is the process initiated by the Public Private Growth Initiative to work with labour and government to craft Masterplans for major sectors that can ignite growth, employment, inclusion and exports. However, such initiatives run the risk of being unable to deliver at the scale required to address large-scale social needs and expectations if they are relegated to the realm of “microeconomic reforms” while not addressing economy-wide macro policies and institutions. And failure to meet legitimate expectations may ultimately further impair social confidence in economic and political institutions.

As a senior executive of one of South Africa’s largest finance and insurance groups recently said to me: “the financial sector’s social licence to operate in South Africa is close to zero”. A reorientation of our macro-financial system is necessary to raise levels of fixed investment in productive sectors. And there are a far broader range of options available than, for instance, the relatively blunt instrument of the state re-invoking the system of prescribed assets.

The taxation system needs to reward reinvestment in industrial capabilities while disincentivising large-scale holdings of cash and other financial instruments. Company law and the corporate governance regime should be overhauled to shift from a short-term shareholder value maximisation orientation to one that champions long-term, patient and increasingly climate-friendly investment. Pension policy reform can embed the reality that long-term returns to pensioners will depend to a considerable degree on long-term productive investments, rather than maximisation of returns in the short-term. The social risks of failing to make such reforms and the long-term costs they impose on retirement investments need to be factored in. Such reforms should dovetail with seizing the opportunity afforded by the Mpati Commission’s review of the Public Investment Corporation to reorient the PIC as the leading institutional investor championing responsible, developmental, long-term investment that, in addition to its current practice of advocating increasing black participation in the upper echelons of corporate South Africa, also robustly embeds considerations of employment, localisation and greening the economy.

I would like to believe that this type of analysis and kind of ambitious yet feasible policy measures to place South Africa on a thriving and more inclusive trajectory would meet with Ben’s approval.
Links between SA housing policy and economy fail to support delivery

By Ivan Turok

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Housing policy has tended to stand apart from economic objectives and disciplines, sometimes by design and sometimes by default. As a result, it has often hindered rather than helped to improve the prosperity of people and places. In this article, the author looks to backyard dwelling as a more vibrant and viable option in the housing sector than the reactive, staid and formulaic current national housing programme.

Housing is a crucial issue for the economy, yet the links between housing and economic progress are generally neglected. This is a problem that has recently come back to bite South Africa, with R12 billion cut from the national housing programme in the 2020 Budget. This followed mounting evidence of its deteriorating performance. Meanwhile, the private house-building industry is in deep distress and bank lending to homebuyers is at an all-time low. Since 1994, neither the public nor the private sectors have proved sufficiently responsive or adaptable to meet the prodigious demand for affordable housing from the expanding urban population.

Consequently, the scarcity of decent shelter has become a major source of frustration and protest among low-income communities, particularly in townships and informal settlements. Social unrest is now actually blocking the progress of many projects, compounded by financial difficulties facing contractors and inadequate basic services.

Yet, there are signs of more dynamic and more adaptive developments outside the formal housing system. Many poor households have been investing whatever resources they can muster to satisfy the need for low-cost accommodation by building flats in their backyards. They have been generating an income for themselves and proving that there is a viable market for cheap rental housing. Backyard dwellings are also enabling urban densification and creating multiplier effects by boosting the demand for building materials and labour. Emerging builders are helping to diversify established housing products and producers with more affordable rental options. These positive features mean that backyard dwellings are the fastest growing segment of the housing market, with more than 200% growth in Gauteng over the last 15 years.

Yet, their very success is creating other problems, including overloaded urban infrastructure. Despite the opportunities and challenges of backyards, the phenomenon is almost completely ignored by housing policy, which remains stuck in a paradigm of top-down state provision.

This article contrasts the
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government’s prevailing housing policy with the organic development of backyard dwellings. It reveals a striking gap between the rigidities and inefficiencies of the state’s formal approach and the flexibilities and adaptability of informal modes of provision. The basic message is that government policy needs to be more responsive to the reality of people’s housing needs, and more sensitive to the role of housing in the economy. Decentralisation of housing responsibilities from national and provincial authorities to municipalities could help to adjust and tailor housing policy to local conditions and thereby improve its impact and effectiveness.

The democratic government’s housing policy originated in a context of immense social pressures and public demands for improvement. The apartheid government had denied black people the right to own property in the cities and had deliberately stopped building homes for them in order to discourage urbanisation. This caused serious overcrowding within the existing housing stock and mushrooming squatter settlements in places where people could evade eviction. The 1994 government saw decent housing as an important way of reducing squalor and deprivation. The Constitution defined housing as a fundamental human right that could help to restore people’s dignity.

As a result, housing came to be treated as part of the ‘social wage’, along with social grants, free basic services and free schooling. In fact, the Constitution referred to the progressive realisation of the right to housing. It did not say that the state was obliged to provide everyone with a free house. The urban housing ‘backlog’ was estimated at 1.3 million units in 1994, or closer to 3 million if people living in hostels and rural areas were included.

The government’s chosen policy instrument gave it maximum control over the quantity and quality of housing delivered. An aspirational target was set to build at least a million ‘RDP’ houses in the first five years. Direct government provision meant that the rate of production was predictable and would not be jeopardised by shifting market conditions or fluctuating private sector involvement. Yet, placing the full burden onto the state let the banks, private developers and indeed employers off the hook.

Government finances were in a precarious position at the time, so each house was limited to 15 square metres at the outset and conceived of as a starter unit. Very little was budgeted for the land or basic infrastructure to service the units. Qualifying households with an income below R3,500 per month (roughly half the population) were gifted these units, without them having to pay any share of the costs or even to contribute their own labour power in construction.

The pressure to deliver at scale resulted in a rapid acceleration from around 60,000 units in 1994/95 to around 230,000 in 1998/99. The target of one million was reached within seven years rather than five – still a notable physical achievement. By 2020, between three and four million units had been built, with considerable uncertainty about the precise figures. The quality of life of most beneficiaries improved as a result of having greater protection from the elements, improved safety, internal municipal services and a place to raise children.

Households were given these units on condition that they did not sell them for at least eight years. The whole policy bore the hallmarks of a social welfare programme to alleviate deprivation through paternalistic state provision. It was not designed as a developmental intervention to unlock people’s energy, strengthen their capabilities and create a progressive pathway out of poverty. The implicit assumption was that the housing problem was caused by indifference and neglect on the part of the apartheid state, so this could be compensated for with more state investment.

The problem was not understood in terms of weaknesses in the economy (the high incidence of unemployment and its effect on housing affordability), a housing market completely skewed towards affluent groups, or people’s limited skills or physical inaccessibility to jobs.

Within a few years, the first major drawback of the RDP programme became apparent – poor project...
The desire to fast-track delivery meant using land parcels that could be developed relatively quickly. This meant taking advantage of sites that were already earmarked for low cost housing by the previous government. Such sites were invariably on the urban periphery, far from jobs, training colleges and amenities. As RDP houses were built on them, additional greenfield sites were identified beyond their outer edges, where the cost of land was low.

Over time this has resulted in the extension of dormitory settlements on the city margins, isolated from opportunities for labour market access and upward mobility. This has locked the sprawl and fragmentation inherited from the apartheid city into the urban landscape. Many people have been effectively trapped in distant locations unable to sell their homes because of the eight-year moratorium and a 1.3 million backlog of title deeds. In many cases the value of their properties has been marked down to below what the government had paid to build them. The policy of building in marginal locations has ended up destroying value rather than creating more vibrant and valuable places, where economic and social outcomes improve over time.

A second weakness of the national housing programme has been its divisive character and apparent unfairness. The state simply cannot satisfy the ever-increasing number of households who qualify for free homes. Some system of rationing is required, which takes the form of waiting lists or registers of people in need. The government has also allowed inflation to erode the qualifying income threshold, thereby eliminating many people from eligibility. Rationing, combined with a lack of community education and awareness-raising, has created false hopes and grievances because many households have had to wait a decade or more.

No less than 1.9 million households are still in need of decent housing. The allocation system also lacks transparency and provokes suspicions that there is political interference in the process and that some people engage in queue jumping by exploiting loopholes. The lack of trust and emergence of winners and losers has become a source of serious social tension and conflict within poor communities, and a major contributor to unrest and disorder. In some places it has resulted in disaffected individuals invading and ransacking the new houses earmarked for officially-approved beneficiaries.

The promise of a free house has also had unintended consequences for other housing programmes. The viability of some social renting schemes has been threatened by tenants embarking on rent boycotts after rumours were spread that they were entitled to own their homes and need not continue paying the rent. Presenting people with gifts can encourage a belief or mindset that they inherently deserve certain privileges and have no responsibility to make a contribution themselves. It does not enable or empower people to be more employable or productive by investing in building their competencies. In fact, the income threshold deters some people from looking for work or a better job because they lose their eligibility for government housing if they succeed in finding a job.

So the increasingly selective targeting of government housing undermines the life chances of people in need. The outcome must be to further marginalise the poorest sections of the population. Many of those fortunate to receive a free house find themselves struggling to pay for their ongoing services, property upkeep and everyday family consumption needs.

Third, the national housing programme has been insulated from economic disciplines and divorced from other parts of the housing system. Unit costs have escalated from the initial R15,000 subsidy towards R150,000 (or R250,000 including the costs of infrastructure services) because of the pressure from beneficiaries for larger houses with better specifications. Yet no effort has been made to define the social return expected from this additional investment.

Instead the programme has become vulnerable to shoddy construction, fraudulent tendering practices and corruption. The negative effect has been to reduce the number of houses that can be built within the budget, adding to the unfairness. Annual production is now less than half what it was in 1999, so the urban housing backlog has actually increased. The government has also failed to use its resources in a creative way to lever additional private sector investment into housing. Instead of complementing and reinforcing private investment, the RDP programme has tended to crowd this out because developers cannot compete with giveaway housing in the affordable sector of the market.

Summing up, the state’s housing model has become monolithic – a machine driven by the short-term politics of construction, i.e. crude numbers. It has not evolved in the light of changing economic circumstances and governance challenges, and it has not adapted to new household demands, such as better access to jobs, livelihoods and social advancement. The programme has carried on regardless of the many criticisms levelled against it, with the result that it exhibits increasing economic, social and environmental deficiencies and is arguably becoming moribund. This helps to explain why the housing budget is now being cut back substantially.

The burgeoning backyard rental sector presents a striking contrast to the national housing programme. It is much more dynamic and responsive to household needs for accessible and affordable flats. People are drawing on
their own agency and resourcefulness to construct suitable accommodation. This is empowering for them and creating a new cohort of small-scale developers and landlords. The state still has a vital role to play, but as an enabler through supplying basic infrastructure and managing the public realm, and less as a direct provider of housing. Backyard growth is being driven by genuine socio-economic requirements rather than arbitrary targets. The quantity of new units being built is very substantial because of the incentives available to emerging entrepreneurs and landlord-developers from meeting real needs and demands.

In many townships, homeowners are showing considerable initiative by replacing makeshift shacks with bricks and mortar structures offering internal toilets and washrooms. Other go-ahead individuals with some savings are also buying up properties informally and replicating this model of backyard apartments, sometimes after demolishing the original freestanding houses. Several private companies, including Indlu, Bitprop, Isiduli, TM Group and After 12, have recognised the commercial potential by offering modest amounts of capital and some expert help to construct the flats in return for a share of the rent. Several of the major banks are also involved as ultimate funders of some of these companies.

The booming supply of better-quality rental property meets the needs of many young working people who can’t afford to buy their own homes and who don’t qualify for RDP housing. It is also much more sensible and flexible for them to rent than to buy. Backyard flats offer more secure and dignified living environments than shacks for those who can afford to pay a modest rent (between R1,500-3,000 a month), but far less than what is normally required in the formal rental market. Backyarding is also beneficial in creating valuable work for local builders, labourers and hardware suppliers, as well as supporting an emerging group of estate agents and rental agents. And it helps to improve the vibrancy of public spaces and the viability of public transport and community facilities in relatively well-located areas that are being densified.

These positives are offset by some risks and pitfalls. Most important, more intensive backyard development is happening in a policy and regulatory vacuum without any formal safeguards and protections. The preoccupation of government housing policy with home-ownership rather than renting is only part of the problem. Backyard units are generally built without adhering to municipal bylaws or building standards because of the complexity and cost of these procedures. Non-compliance means there is no formal oversight of the structural integrity of the flats, including their foundations, reinforced walls and roofs, and basic design quality. This poses obvious risks to residents’ health and safety and compromises the long-term resale value of the properties.

Ignoring land-use planning and zoning controls means developing beyond the capacity of the municipal water, sanitation and electricity infrastructure. When a dozen or more households occupy township plots designed for single families, there are serious consequences for sewage spillovers, electricity breakdowns, water shortages and the spread of fires. Informal backyarding offers little or no protection to the rights of tenants, who are vulnerable to arbitrary evictions and inflated rents. Some land invasions are caused by disgruntled backyarders struggling to pay the higher rents being demanded by landlords.

Homeowners are prone to manipulation and unfair practices themselves. Unscrupulous building contractors and money lenders can take advantage of their financial illiteracy and poor knowledge of construction techniques to provide inferior services and swindle them.

All spheres of government currently have a hands-off approach to backyarding. Having installed the physical infrastructure and built many of the original houses, officials expect to manage these areas through rules and procedures that aren’t fit for purpose. The controls were devised in a different context and are unrealistic in the prevailing circumstances. Some officials try to enforce these norms and standards but quickly back off in the face of community resistance and violent threats. Most just ignore what is happening on the ground instead of engaging with the process. A cautious auditing culture, weak relationships with communities, and limited political support discourage a hands-on approach.

This risks a downward spiral in due course as population densities rise, services become overburdened, infrastructure decays, environmental conditions deteriorate, social trust diminishes and the state’s capacity to enforce standards declines. Municipalities raise very little revenue from property taxes or service charges in the townships, despite the sizeable rents collected by some landlords. Municipal leaders are reluctant to continue investing public funds in communities that can afford to pay something, but won’t.

It is possible to envisage a positive scenario offering broader benefits. Public bodies could strive to contain the negative effects of intensive backyard development and create a more productive dynamic with better outcomes all round. One element would be to simplify the system of land registration so that households have greater security of tenure and can exchange property safely without risking their investments. A simpler transfer process would encourage people to go the formal route rather than sell property informally.
would reduce uncertainty and opportunism, and support longer-term decision-making. Having collateral would make it easier for property owners to raise external finance so as to construct better buildings.

An up-to-date land registration system would also assist property valuation, and the municipality could start collecting taxes on properties above a certain threshold. More tax collection would help to pay for enlarged infrastructure urgently required to accommodate the growing population. In addition, regulatory reforms could help to attract more investment in rental housing. Rules governing the built environment should be streamlined to ensure that standards are appropriate for low-income dwellings and that administrative procedures can accommodate inexperienced applicants. Health and safety considerations should take precedence over cosmetic factors, such as external finishes. Official mindsets need to shift from indifference towards an enabling approach that makes positive things happen. Local advice centres staffed by multi-disciplinary teams could offer people very practical assistance to achieve minimum building standards and formal approvals. Simplified systems to oversee landlord-tenant relationships are also worth considering to protect tenants from exploitation.

The fundamental principle is to create more responsive ways of regularising informal rental housing in order to develop the sector into a robust and integral part of the urban housing system. A gradual upgrading approach in line with rising household incomes should enable people to adjust to the improvements with minimal displacement. Shifting from a cautious mentality to a developmental disposition requires public officials to engage actively with informality to encourage more investment in better rental properties and fairer rental practices.

There is striking contrast between the rather staid, formulaic character of the national housing programme and the more dynamic attributes of backyard rental property. The former has lost impetus and requires major reform, while the latter is more vigorous and expansive. Backyard development resonates with the requirements of residents for more flexible accommodation and the needs of poor homeowners for a regular income. In harnessing the energy of communities it is helping to diversify the housing choices available in cities and demonstrate the existence of a viable market for low-cost rental units. With government support, the current small-scale backyard suppliers could perhaps evolve into more substantial producers of affordable housing and thereby make a larger contribution to tackling the housing crisis.

One of the essential requirements is to shift the stance of government entities from merely reacting to events on the ground towards planning ahead and engaging in a more pro-active manner with backyarding. Instead of just putting out fires, fixing electricity breakdowns and unblocking sewers, municipalities should be investing in higher capacity infrastructure. They should provide constructive advice and support to small developers and introduce simpler bylaws and procedures to govern the process of backyard development. This means shifting the focus from the internal features of the dwelling to managing the neighbourhood context, including safeguarding open spaces and public amenities. By playing a positive role rather than a policing function, responsive municipalities could start to collect property rates and service charges. The revenue stream they generate could help to pay for the reinvestment in township infrastructure. In short, government needs to create the conditions in which the process of urbanisation taking place is more productive, is creating more liveable settlements, and is generating jobs, skills, livelihoods and taxes.

ENDNOTES


6. GTAC. 2016

7. DPME. 2019

8. SACN. 2014

9. GTAC. 2016; Hamann, et al, 2018

10. Savage. 2014

11. Turok. 2016b

12. DPME. 2019

13. Turok. 2016a

14. GTAC. 2016; SACN. 2014; Savage. 2014

15. DPME. 2019


17. Savage. 2014; GTAC. 2016

18. SACN. 2014; Savage 2014; GTAC. 2016


21. Scheba and Turok. 2020


23. Scheba and Turok. 2020
Voices from the Underground: Eighteen life stories from Umkhonto we Sizwe’s Ashley Kriel Detachment

Edited by Shirley Gunn and Shanil Haricharan

Published by Penguin. 400 pps

Book review by Moira Levy

Ben Turok’s first attempt at sabotage as a member of the newly formed Umkhonto we Sizwe is presented rather comically in his autobiography, Nothing but the Truth. He describes how his car had suddenly filled with smoke when one of the bombs they were carrying proved faulty. Ben pulled to a stop at “one of the busiest [intersections] in the whole of Johannesburg”, immediately drawing a curious crowd and the attentions of a traffic cop, and he leapt out of the car to make a run for it.

But his unit commander ordered that they proceed with their mission – to set off an explosive in the Rissik Street post office. Except that the explosive did nothing more than singe Ben’s hair and burn holes in his suit, which made Mary rather suspicious. And he was left to try to convince a determined journalist that it was not he, Ben, who had been spotted running away from a burning car in central Joburg.

It makes a good story, and Ben was always able to tell a good story. He was also able to laugh at himself. But that does not mean he did not take the incident very seriously. He wrote: “I was concerned about the amateurishness and bungling of the whole operation. I went to see Joe Slovo to say that I thought that the whole operation had been schoolboyish.” He indicates that MK reviewed its operations and in time could report that over 18 months, it successfully carried out 193 attacks. His own story had a serious ending. The security police identified a fingerprint at the scene of the “crime” with the result that Ben spent three years in jail as a result of his first MK operation.

The MK that Shirley Gunn and Shanil Haricharan describe in Voices from the Underground also include stories of some bungling, and a serious incident with a faulty limpet mine that resulted in the tragic death of two young combatants. But the preface to the book written by James Ngcula, who was then the AKD’s front commander in Botswana, declares “anyone wanting to understand supreme commitment and discipline need look no further than the pages of this book”.

Voices from the Underground comprises a collection of life stories from 18 former members of MK’s Ashley Kriel Detachment (AKD). Co-editor Harichara described the importance of the AKD life story project:

“We talk about reconciliation and healing in South Africa; however as former combatants and activists, we have not done much to reflect on our...”}

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traumatic experiences. Expressing deeply held feelings made me realise that we have not had a time to grieve.

“Our feelings of betrayal, loss, sadness, guilt and hurt remain within us. The process of sharing my story has put me on a journey of healing past wounds.”

This is the voice of the MK of 30 years later than the one Ben described, and it provides an interesting counterpoint. Named after comrade and student leader Ashley Kriel, who was killed by the security forces soon after his return to South Africa after undergoing military training in an ANC camp in Angola, the AKD kept going after many others decided it was all over.

A number of these personal accounts of very different people who found themselves united in a common purpose, make reference to the declaration by Nelson Mandela from the balcony of Cape Town city hall on his release: “The factors which necessitated the armed struggle still exist today. We have no option but to continue.”

And the AKD continued, only laying down their arms years later when demobilisation was announced. Following the instructions of the newly released Commander-in-Chief, and to demonstrate that the ANC was still armed and ready to carry on the fight, on the very day of Mandela’s release they carried out three simultaneous operations. They blew up the turnstile at the Newlands Cricket Grounds to protest against the English rebel cricket tour, and attacked the Parow Civic Centre and Paarl’s Magistrate’s Court.

Like MK when it was launched in 1961, the AKD also operated during one of the most intense periods of state oppression and violence. The significant difference was that MK was formed when the apartheid government was all-powerful. A statement broadcast by the ANC at that time, quoted in Ben’s book, states that it was forced into armed struggle by the apartheid state. “The choice is not ours; it has been made by the Nationalist Government which has rejected every peaceable demand by the people for rights and freedom and has answered every demand with force and yet more force!”

The AKD took on the state during the 1980s, at a time when OR Tambo had called on the people to make the country ungovernable, and they had responded with a massive show of the strength of organised communities.

The contribution of the AKD unit was significant. It introduced a shift in tactics, moving away from the “Big Bang” approach of single, large-scale operations, to multiple synchronised attacks, which sent the security forces running in all directions, unable to mount an intensive counter attack.

Probably the most audacious operation the unit carried out was the setting off of a bomb right in the belly of the beast, at the Castle of Good Hope which was then the provincial headquarters of the South African Defence Force. This attack was conducted by co-Commander Shirley Gunn, posing as a tourist. Another time she placed a limpet mine outside a meeting of the Conservative Party, which went off just as proceedings were closing with the singing of Die Stem.

The strategy that the book describes indicates a close link to community struggles as the unit targeted the symbols of authority used to implement apartheid oppression; local police stations, magistrate’s courts, municipal offices, a rent office during a rent boycott, the blowing up of railway lines in support of striking workers.

Their mission was to set up the AKD in coloured, Indian and white areas and they successfully transported weapons into South Africa from the ANC, mainly in Botswana; communicated and carried out instructions from MK commanders as high up as Chris Hani; crossed the border illegally, or helped others to do so; and underwent military training that enabled them to carry out attacks within South Africa under the noses of a security force that had demonstrated it would stop at nothing to wipe them out.

Senior members of the AKD were trained in Cuba, Angola, Zambia and Tanzania. They then recruited and trained units within the country. In the book they describe the intense stress of living with the constant threat of detection, betrayal, detention, torture, or worse. Some were forced into living deep underground, moving constantly from one safe house to another.

At the same time, unit members tried to assert some form of normalcy into their lives; couples married, started families, others tried to finish their schooling. Those who were not forced into hiding held down normal jobs while working underground, contributing their salaries to the unit. By also engaging in above ground activism they disguised their underground work as they participated in the Mass Democratic Movement by taking part openly in the protest and turbulence of those times.

This book is not about heroes, though much of what the AKD did was indeed heroic. This is a collection of the tales of the ordinary people who, having decided they simply would not tolerate apartheid, did what they had to in order to dismantle it, at enormous danger and personal cost to themselves. What also stands out in the book is the unquestioning support they got from ordinary people, who provided support, safe houses, medical attention, much needed food and money, without any questions asked.

This is not only a book which provides a rare inside view of an MK unit that, under the most dangerous conditions, succeeded in launching more than 30 attacks between late 1987 and early 1990. It also tells the story of the communities that created them, protected them and supported their work in a way that made all of them heroes and combatants in the struggle against apartheid oppression. N.A.
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