

ANC NATIONAL CONFERENCE JULY 1991 DURBAN
NELSON MANDELA'S CLOSING ADDRESS

Comrades, I must first thank the independent Electoral Commission for the excellent work they have done. Their work has been professional in the proper sense of the word. They briefed us very carefully and very patiently about the procedure that was going to be adopted, and all of us clearly understood what they required. They put aside long hours in order that they should keep up with the pressure of work which the extraordinarily large number of delegates cast upon them. We will forever remain indebted to them for their magnificent performance.

I would also like to thank the National Preparatory Committee which made the elaborate arrangements in order that this Conference should take place according to plan. I also thank our comrades in Durban for their efforts. I must express, as I did in my opening speech, our appreciation to Professor Reddy for having made this university available to us in order to hold this Conference. It is an indication of the changing times, because this university was established as a bush college. It was never intended that an organisation like the ANC would hold a conference in a place of this nature.

You have entrusted me with the presidency of the ANC. It is a daunting task. In February last year shortly after I was released from prison I travelled all the way to Sweden to visit Comrade Oliver Tambo as he was recuperating in a clinic. One of the first things I told him was that in view of his state of health he was no longer in a position to carry out his duties as president. He then offered to resign from that post. I pointed out to him that it was not necessary for him to do so. He must give himself and ourselves a chance to let him carry out his duties and those of us who had worked with him over the years would see how his duties were carried out in his absence, and that if by the next conference of the ANC he still felt that he could not discharge his duties, he should leave the matter entirely until the next conference. Although he tried to persuade me I staunchly refused to accede to his request. However, as I told you the other day, he again approached the NEC and indicated that he was not available to serve. We then released him. You have now given me this responsibility. It will not be very easy for me to follow the giant footsteps of Comrade OR. Comrade OR, who is affectionately known as Chief to his comrades, paved the way forward with gold, the gold of his humanity, his warmth, his democratic spirit, tolerance and above all intellectual brilliance, which in the end outwitted the racists in this country.

Of course, comrades, no struggle can depend on one person. The struggle is basically a collective affair. But there are exceptions to every rule, and looking at the history of the 30 last years of exile, one may be tempted to think that Comrade OR is that exception. As I pointed out, I know his humility, I will not continue to embarrass him by with further praise; it is sufficient to say there is not enough rain in the skies for us to be able to shower on him the honour he deserves.

We have had the privilege to participate in one of the most democratic processes this country has ever seen. During the past five days we have witnessed a process which will be remembered in the history of the ANC and the country as a whole as having set a standard for democratic participation. This historic conference has had a total of 2,244 voting delegates who were democratically elected at branches. Eighty five percent of this number were elected from the branches inside the country. We have changed the face of conferences to come by having the participation of our membership, represented in the steering committee and the preparatory committee of this conference through their regional representatives. Thus, comrades, we are all responsible for the successes we have achieved here today.

Debates leading up to this conference included rigorous debate within branches and at regional level on the policies which formed the basis of the debate at this Conference. The discussions within the plenary and in the commissions were remarkable for their frankness. Criticisms were given and taken in a debate organised to facilitate such a process. This conference has reflected the

shifts we have made in our own organisation, and the transformation from a banned illegal formation to a mass based and democratic organisation. And this conference has also reflected the amount of work we have to do to consolidate our policies among all the people in this country.

We have achieved an important milestone in our history, and that is a merging of the different strands of our organisation. The lessons we have learnt from our experiences in exile have been strengthened by the lessons we have learnt from all our attempts to build a mass-based ANC inside the country. These processes have allowed outstanding men and women to emerge as our leadership, and today we can say the process at all levels has begun. And exiles are strengthened by the wealth of experience of those of our cadres who built organisation in the towns, in rural areas of our country, at a branch and leadership level. This executive we have just elected is a clear indication of this fact. We have both leaders from exile and leaders from inside who are now entrusted with the task of leading the overwhelming majority of our population, indeed of leading the whole country to a new South Africa. We have adopted a constitution which provides for the fullest participation of the membership at grassroots level, and a national leadership with the power to lead and guide on matters of the moment, as well as the major long-term issues facing us. I have the honour to congratulate the new leadership, and wish them success in their respective tasks.

I must also pay and add my compliments and appreciation to the services of the outgoing executive and especially to those who have not been able to maintain their position. The fact that they have not been elected does not indicate dissatisfaction with their performance. I am sure they will be the first to understand that that is how the democratic process works. It is me today, it will be comrade Cheryl Carolus tomorrow who will lead this organisation. We thank them. We are indebted to all of them for the amount of work they put in, and that is why today we have such a strong organisation. The logical question to pose is: what happens to those members of the executive who have not been able to be reelected. Many of them are fairly old. They cannot get employment in industry; they have to maintain families and send children to school. The ANC will have to look at the matter as a matter of urgency, and not allow men and women who have sacrificed so much to suffer. We have no resources but will do everything in our power to make their living conditions as bearable as possible.

The leadership we have elected here today reflects the national character of our people, including class and gender composition. Our people have strong commitments to the goals that the overwhelming majority seeks, that of justice, peace, democracy, unity and non-racialism. Our people have elected a leadership mature in character, men and women who will lead our collective with brave foresight.

We will ensure that our strategy and tactics are informed by the experiences of all the people in this country. Comrades, it is our revolutionary duty to support this leadership and to guide it so that we will ensure that we involve the people as fully as possible in the vital decisions we have to make in this very critical period of our struggle. The non-racial unity of our country is non-negotiable, and may not be compromised. We also have to ensure that the policies we have adopted here are given the correct administrative support. We believe that it is not only the task of the NEC, but of every member of the ANC.

As I have said earlier, we have had a very serious debate here, and today we can return to our branches with clear mandates. On the question of negotiations, this conference has given us all a very clear mandate. We have reaffirmed the premise that negotiations is a terrain of struggle leading to our central objective, the transfer of power to the people. Delegates have determined that we are not yet in a state of transition. There still remains an enormous difference in the perceptions of the oppressed about the nature of the necessary changes that have to occur, and the character of future society; and that of the Nationalist Party government. We have determined here that we cannot accept the regime's claim to recognition as the main agency of change and the manager of the current period of transition. Conference thus confirmed the position as previously communicated to

the regime. The ANC is an equal partner, and not simply an organisation that is to be informed or consulted by the regime. We have asserted that everything has been done to build maximum unity among the forces committed to the perspective of a non-sexist, non-racist democracy; and to ensure that such forces act in unity throughout the process of negotiations.

The leadership has been mandated to establish a patriotic front as soon as possible. Conference has also given this, the NEC, the mandate to establish a comprehensive and representative team of negotiators, to continue our task of ensuring that the transfer of power to the people is a peaceful one. We must also admit that the manner in which we have handled the negotiations up to now has been subject to severe criticism both inside and outside this hall. Some of these criticisms have been fair, have been valid. One of the criticisms has been that there has not been sufficient consultation before we entered negotiations on a particular issue. There has also been the fair criticism that there has been no systematic and regular reporting on the outcome of negotiations, and that the membership has remained ignorant of what was going on in these discussions. We fully acknowledge that criticism. We acknowledge it without reservation, and we can assure you that in future we have taken note of this fact, and that in future we will try and work as systematically as you have demanded.

We have also resolved to build our organisation into a strong and well-oiled task force. The NEC has been mandated to take an inclusive approach to the question of building a programme of action to strengthen our organisation. Door-to-door-campaigns to bring the policies of the ANC alive to the people, strengthening of the tripartite alliance, and sensitivity to the fears expressed by minority groups in our country were debated, and we can confidently say that this conference has endorsed the perspective of building a mass-based ANC to the fullest extent. I think it is proper here to be absolutely brutal about our weaknesses in this regard. There has been no effective communication between the ANC and the minority groups of this country. Many of us have made the mistake of thinking that the mere declaration of our policy in the Freedom Charter, because it is the most progressive policy ever published by any political organisation in this country, meant that the masses would come rushing to join the ANC. This is not the position. Some of our structures have been so set up as to exclude the minority groups. That has been a serious weakness, because it indicates that the overwhelming majority of the Africans in this country are not taking into account the minority groups of this country. It is true that our policies are non-racial, but let us be realistic about it. There are different ethnic groups in this country, and ethnicity, especially because of the policies of the government, is still a dangerous threat to us. We have to redouble our efforts to make sure we have the confidence of all the different sections of the people of this country, something which is not there at the present moment.

Whilst we deliberated here our membership in the Vaal area and this province have been attacked by vigilantes and, it is believed, by some elements of the security forces. We will have to make certain that the resolutions taken here on violence are implemented, and that we reaffirm our resolve to defend our country from the attempts being made to destabilise the peace process. In this regard you will have noted the statement which appeared on television and in the press made by President De Klerk in which he condemned the attacks very strongly and expressed his sympathies to the victims of these cruel attacks. We welcome such a statement from President de Klerk. We have criticised him very harshly, and that criticism was justified, but when he does something which is commendable, it is part of honesty as public figures and as leaders to acknowledge it. When he makes a mistake, we will express ourselves quite openly on that point, as we have done on numerous occasions before.

If he had done this right from the beginning, this violence would not have intensified to the state it has. We must defend our people at the same time as we push forward the process of leading to the transfer of power to our people. We have to move faster on the question of achieving a Constituent Assembly. The power of our organised masses will outweigh any attempts to destabilise us. The Interim Government debate has been a long one, and we have reaffirmed our position that it would

be incorrect for the Nationalist Party to continue to govern this country on its own, and we have resolved that an Interim Government would have to be formed in such a manner that it is broadly acceptable.

The MK commission was lively and the debate well rounded. We have resolved that MK should have a structured relationship with all levels of the organisation, and that the organisation shall take responsibility for the maintenance of the army both inside and outside the country. We will do our very best in this regard.

On Friday I attended a session of the MK commission. It became clear to me after listening to the speakers that the problems of MK cannot be properly addressed in a one-day commission. A separate conference of MK cadres attended by leading members of the NEC is necessary if justice is to be done to their complaints. The question of the suspension of armed action will be an important question on the agenda. It has already surfaced in the discussions that we have had. Although we have given what we regarded as an adequate explanation for having taken this action, nevertheless dissatisfaction continues to surface, and it is our duty to address that question.

Sanctions, as you all witnessed, also generated a great deal of debate, and I hope I am not patronising when I say Cde Thabo Mbeki handled this matter very well. I did not have the opportunity of listening to his entire address, but the little bit that I had the privilege to listen to I endorse it without reservation, because it is an attempt to get the delegates as well as the organisation not to rely on mere rhetoric but to look at the problem as it is developing. We want to continue to hold the line on the question of sanctions, and unless there is a great deal of flexibility and imagination we will be left holding a shell and nothing else. We will continue to call on the international community to support the position of the ANC for peace and unity in this country. We have asked conference to consider the question of using a phased perspective on the question of sanctions, and we have not been disappointed in the vision of our people. Sanctions have been a potent weapon, and we have made many gains. We have to continue to achieve maximum benefit out of this strategy. Many of our friends are under pressure to lift sanctions, and will not do so without consulting the ANC. We have to make a particular comment on the position taken by the Danish Parliament, whose position is to ensure that the EEC maintain sanctions until all the conditions in the Harare Declaration have been met. We also have to make particular comment on the position of the Bush Administration, whose position has been to consult the ANC before making any decision, even though the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act will force them to lift sanctions once all the apartheid laws are off the statute books. But we have problems with some of our colleagues in Africa, whose economies are strained as a result of the support they have shown to our cause. We cannot be inflexible in our approach to this particular policy. I do not want my remarks to be misunderstood. We are calling for flexibility and for imagination; for an approach which is realistic. But our position is very clear: sanctions must continue to be maintained and applied. That is our position. The flexibility we want exercised is intended to ensure that this weapon is kept in our hands.

This conference has had a significant and historical debate on the question of the participation and representation of women, and this debate has carried the ANC much further than it has ever been. This heated frank and open debate was one of the most important in this conference because we were talking about a fundamental principle, a fundamental policy of the ANC, firmly entrenched in our alliance. We have to begin to work on mechanisms which ensure that affirmative action becomes positive reality. I can say with all confidence that after that debate, and after the women had demonstrated their intensity of feeling on this issue, the ANC will never be the same.

Then there is the question of the homeland leaders, which has been raised very strongly. Again, we must confess that we have made mistakes in this regard. It is true that in some areas we have entered discussions with homeland leaders without proper consultations with our grassroots members in that particular area. We must assure you that this mistake will be attended to and in fact

it is already being attended to. One can quote a few examples. In KaNgwane we have been able to consult our local branch there and the region. Not only that, we have brought the homeland leaders, as well as our people, our comrades, in a joint meeting to discuss their differences. We have done the same thing in Gazankulu. Our local membership has been brought together with the homeland leaders there to discuss their differences and iron them out. The emphatic point is that this matter is already being attended to, and we appreciate the frankness of delegates on this matter.

Then there is the question of mass action. Many people have alleged that we are now giving more attention to negotiations and ignoring mass action. We regret to say that this is an allegation which is made by people who have no real idea of what is happening in their own organisation, in their own country. Because it is common knowledge that at no time in our history have we had so many forms of mass action as we have done during the last two years. So much so that our labour organisations have had to give us a warning that we must not just resort to mass action every time we get angry, that the question of mass action must be carefully examined because of the downturn in the economy of the country, and the high level of unemployment. And those people therefore who continue saying that we have abandoned mass action, with respect, they are not very sure of their facts.

Because of the enthusiasm that has been shown here, I do not consider it necessary to go into details about our achievements. But perhaps it is necessary for me to just to say in very brief outline that the ANC in this country continues to hold the strategic initiative, and those people who say that the initiative has passed on to Mr De Klerk are just giving vent to their own wishes. The point is the ANC has made very significant achievements. It has been able to isolate the regime. As comrade OR showed in his address, we have no less than 40 representatives with foreign governments, and sanctions continue to bite deep in the coffers of this country. We were able to reject the conditions which the government sought to impose for the release of political prisoners; they said before they could release us we must condemn violence, we must distance ourselves from the Communist Party; we must go to the homelands, to rule ourselves there comfortably without interference. We rejected all those conditions, and today, all the political prisoners covered by the definitions to which I referred are back with us, without signing any of those conditions.

Most important, we have made a gain on the ideological level. The government during the last 40 years has told the country and the world that the solution to the problems of this country was the policy of apartheid, in which blacks would continue to be hewers of wood and drawers of water. On the contrary we announced a non-racial policy; we announced that we were and still are fighting for a democratic South Africa, moulded on the principle of one person, one vote. The government has now admitted they were wrong and we were right. They have embraced our policy, and there could be no greater victory than that.

On the question of sanctions, where they say sanctions are crumbling, that may be true but they are exaggerating the matter; they do not tell us that the decision taken by the EEC countries in December last year to lift sanctions on gold and iron ore, those decisions cannot be taken because of a decision of the Danish government; a decision of the EEC is that all decisions should be taken unanimously, and the decision of the Danish government rejecting the decision of the EEC makes that unanimity impossible; and that decision on the authority of the president of the EEC, to whom I spoke about three weeks ago, on his authority, that decision cannot be carried out until the Danish parliament changes its decision.

In conclusion, comrades, we are very happy indeed to have had such a successful conference. We are happy about the contributions you have made, the constructive criticisms that you have brought forward. The leadership must listen to the membership, because we are here to serve the membership and our people. But you must also listen to us. You have given us a mandate to lead this organisation and we are going to do just that. But we are a great organisation which believes in collective responsibility. That collective responsibility means not only that the National Executive should take collective decisions, it means we must listen carefully to what you say, and take that

into account in our political activities. We want you to know that you yourselves, whether you are on the National Executive or not, on the Regional Executive Committee, on the Branch Executive Committee or not, you as a member of the ANC are a leader in your own name and right; and it is in that spirit that we address you. It is in that spirit that we will listen to your criticisms and your suggestions, and if you do that there is no doubt that the road to Union Buildings and Tuynhuys has become all the shorter.