

The unity of our movement

is our strength

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As we approach the centenary of the African National Congress in 2012, we need to ask ourselves if our organisation has any resemblance to the organisation that was formed nearly one hundred years ago and, if not, what changes and lessons can be derived from such developments.

Reading through various works concerning the formation of the ANC, there is no doubt that Pixley ka Isaka Seme was the originator of the idea to found the ANC and that he worked tirelessly to ensure its fruition, arguably more than anyone else.

Speaking of the African in an award-winning speech, simply entitled "The Regeneration of Africa", he said:

The ancestral greatness, the unimpaired genius, and the recuperative power of the race, its irrepressibility, which assures its permanence, constitute the African's greatest source of inspiration. He has refused to camp forever on the borders of the industrial world; having learned that knowledge is power, he is educating his children. You find them in Edinburgh, in Cambridge, and in the great schools of Germany. These return to their country like arrows, to drive darkness from the land. I hold that his industrial and educational initiative, and his untiring devotion to these activities, must be regarded as positive evidences of this process of his regeneration.

Pixley Seme, later to be known as Pixley ka Isaka Seme, was in the US as a student when he presented this speech in 1906. This was the same year as the famous defeat of the Bambatha Rebellion, yet Seme had such great hope for the African continent.



The general background to the formation of the ANC was the military defeat of the Africans, their subjugation to colonial rule and their gross marginalisation from the mainstream social, economic and political development of our country. The Bambatha Rebellion marked the last of such defeats, and reinforced the calls for unity among the African people throughout southern Africa against the colonial onslaught.

That is why the ANC founding conference in 1912 was attended by royalty from Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia and those of tribes and kingdoms from within South Africa, including kings, princes, paramount chiefs and chiefs.

It is for this reason that unity is the foundation stone of the ANC throughout all its existence. When the national conference burst into Enoch Sontonga's "Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika", that alone amplified the message of unity across the continent in the struggle against colonial oppression. This song became the ANC's anthem and informed the composition of our country's national anthem.

In the first instance, they were responding to events that seemed to sideline them in the reconstituting of South Africa. Having fought among themselves during the Anglo-Boer war from 1899 to 1902, the colonisers ended their conflicts with the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging in 1902. Thereafter, they set out to unite against the African masses, seeking autonomy from Britain in 1909. This was granted, leading to the formation of the exclusively white Union of South Africa in 1910. They went about imposing segregated tax and other laws, limiting the rights of Africans on their



land in order to force dependency on the mushrooming mining activities that followed the discovery of gold and diamonds in the Witwatersrand and Kimberley.

Africans continued to work towards emancipation, and Seme led the African Farmers Association which bought farms to benefit Africans. However, these efforts were dealt a blow by the promulgation of the 1913 Land Act, the effect of which was to curtail Africans' rights to land ownership.

On this matter, the journalist RV Selope Thema wrote:

Another enterprise undertaken by this man of vision was the establishment of an African Farmers Association, and an African settlement at Daggakraal in the Eastern Transvaal. The association gave impetus to the purchasing of land by Africans in the Transvaal. The Daggakraal settlement caused consternation among neighbouring farmers, who declared that unless the buying of land by Natives was restricted, South Africa would never be a white man's country. Indeed it was no exaggeration that it was the Daggakraal settlement which precipitated the enactment of the Natives Land Act in 1913.

What followed were petitions against the Union government, which were met with non-response. Deputations to England were then also made, as South Africa, although independent, still pledged allegiance to the English royal family until it was granted the status of a republic.

Even these petitions never carried Marcus Garvey's extreme pan-Africanist slogan to "hurl the white man into the sea". There can be a lot of debate as to why Seme adopted the position of fighting what former President Nelson Mandela called "white domination".

AFRICAN ELITE

A combination of missionary education and the social class of those behind the formation of the ANC in 1912 could have had an impact on the ideological orientation of the organisation. Pixley ka Isaka Seme was born into a Christian family, and so was his cousin, the Rev John Langalibalele Dube, who was elected first president of the ANC. The influence of Christianity is further confirmed in Seme's keynote speech on 8 January 1912:

There is to-day among all races and men a general desire for progress, and for co-operation, because co-operation will facilitate and secure that progress. This spirit is due no doubt to the great triumph of Christianity which teaches men everywhere that in this world they have a common duty to perform both towards God and towards one another.

No doubt, the ANC was formed by elite and educated African people who were partly inspired by their Christian faith. Nonetheless, their main complaint was the disenfranchisement of the African, notably due to

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the 1910 Union of South Africa dispensation. It was no coincidence that they also sang "Lizalise idinga lakho, Thixo wenyanyiso".

According to Selope Thema:

When he was studying at Columbia and Oxford universities and eating his dinners at the Middle Temple, Pixley Seme's mind was wholly occupied with the idea of how to rebuild the broken Zulu nation. But when he saw what was happening to all Africans of all tribes, he changed his mind. Probably he remembered that the ultimate object of Tshaka in building the Zulu nation was to bring all the tribes under Zulu sway so as to eventually create a powerful nation of all the Africans.

Why should he not take this idea of Tshaka to fruition, he asked himself as he paced to and fro in his office at the corner of Rissik and Marshall Streets. He turned over the idea in his mind and finally came to the conclusion that the scheme was worth attempting.

From this short passage it is clear that Pixley ka Isaka Seme's preoccupation was with the unity of Africans as their basic weapon to resist their own racial discrimination and confront colonial oppression. As he went about consulting with fellow Africans, he discovered that his sentiments were echoed by various chiefs, church leaders and other leading personalities among the African people. So there was fertile ground for co-operation, probably due to the defeat of these African kingdoms by the colonial powers and the realisation of the age-old wisdom that "unity is strength".

The purpose of the ANC is explained by Seme:

The South African Native National Congress is the voice in the wilderness bidding all the dark races of this subcontinent to come together once or twice a year in order to review the past and reject therein all those things which have retarded our progress; the things which poison the springs of our national life and virtue; to label and distinguish the sins of civilisation, and as members of one household to talk and think loudly on our home problems and the solutions to them.

The purpose of the ANC to be the "Parliament of the People" is well captured in the 1919 preamble to the constitution that was initially adopted in 1914:



AND WHEREAS there met at Bloemfontein O.F.S. on the 8th day of January 1912, certain Chiefs, delegates and other leading men in all representing the said Territories, Protectorates, the Provinces and also the aforesaid bodies throughout South Africa;

AND the said meeting, there and then, resolved that it was expedient and desirable that a well-digested and accepted native opinion should be ascertainable by the Government and other constituted Authorities with respect to the Native problem in all its various phases and ramifications;

AND it was then further resolved to invite all aforementioned Associations, Organisations or Vigilant Committees and Councils to unite together and form as affiliated bodies, a Federation of one Pan African Association the name thereof to be "The South African National Congress" (hereinafter in these recitals called the "National Congress") and to be composed and consist of two sections or Houses – to wit, one section then to be known as the Upper House and the other the Lower House.

This clearly showed the influence of the American and British educations received by the masterminds behind the formation of the ANC, such as Seme, Dube and Sol Plaatje, who became the first secretary-general. They modelled the ANC on the conservative British parliamentary system, with lower and upper houses and fully-fledged speakers.

The dominant role of chiefs was well covered in the constitution adopted in 1919. They were afforded certain privileges, such as specially designated seating arrangements during national conferences and the authority to handle disputes involving them or between them. The conservative culture of the early ANC was sculpted through the influence of leaders who were themselves conservative and opposed to violent protests.

It could be said that the 1912 conference was a convergence of conservatives. They preferred peaceful petitioning and deputations, hoping that these tactics would appeal to the conscience of their oppressors by proving that they too were civilised beings worth equal treatment as citizens. It could be

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- Pixley ka Isaka Seme

argued that this was pure idealism, as opposed to a dialectical examination of observed evidence of the contending forces between the coloniser and the colonised.

THE 1912 CONFERENCE

On 8 January 1912, throngs of tribal leaders, clergy, clerks, journalists and others who constituted the elite of African society, dressed in the colourful regalia of the various tribes of our people, descended on what is today Mangaung. They had answered the call for unity among the African people – and the importance of this point alone cannot be overemphasised.

And how would the ANC go about achieving these ideals? Again, Seme gives the answer:

Such National Conferences of the people are bound to give a wide publication of the Natives' own views on the questions which primarily concern him tomorrow and today. Through this Congress, the Native Senators in the Union House of Parliament will be able to live in close touch with the Natives of the whole country whose interest each Senator is supposed to represent. The Government also will find a direct and independent channel of informing itself as to the things uppermost in Natives' mind from time to time, and this will make it easier for the Union Government to deal with the Natives of the whole of South Africa. If we wish to convince the Government that it is possible to have a uniform Native policy for the whole of South Africa then let us form this Congress.

This perspective shows that the ANC believed in changing the discriminatory political and economic systems of the day, rather than seeking fundamental revolutionary change. In other words, racial domination was the key challenge to be eradicated. The ANC was to be the parliament of the natives, and through this platform to influence developments in favour of the Africans.

In his 1912 keynote speech, Seme spoke elaborately about unity among the oppressed and marginalised Africans:

Again, it is conclusively urgent that this Congress should meet this year, because a matter which is so vitally important to our progress and welfare should not be unnecessarily postponed by reason of personal differences and selfishness of our leaders. The demon of racialism, the aberrations of the Xosa-Fingo feud, the animosity



that exists between the Zulus and the Tongaas, between the Basutos and every other Native must be buried and forgotten; it has shed among us sufficient blood! We are one people. These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance today. A great Paramount Chief, accepting that his name be included in the honourable list of Native princes who endorse and support this movement, writes that he however 'wishes to point out that whilst the objects and the aims of a Congress appear to be good and reasonable, much of the success depends upon the attitude of the members. There should be among other things a firm resolve on the part of every member to eliminate factors which have in the past proved fatal to the continued existence of such Societies.'

Not only was Seme calling for unity, he was also making the case that this was the view of the people he had consulted prior to the convention. Even paramount chiefs were behind the thrust towards unity in confronting the challenges of sweeping discrimination against the African natives.

Are we not found wanting in the education of our children?

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The founding of the ANC in 1912 points to several policy issues that are relevant for us today.

Firstly, that the defeat of the Africans called for their unity, and that the unity of the ANC has been the golden thread for the past hundred years. It required that African people embrace the attitude of non-tribalism, as argued by the chief to whom Seme referred.

Secondly, that non-racialism was the broad policy framework within which the ANC aimed to emancipate the disenfranchised African masses.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, was the primary objective of liberating Africans from colonial oppression. Linked to the objective of liberation was the principle of self-determination.

A fourth issue is captured in the opening of Seme's "Regeneration of Africa" speech, where he proclaimed: "I am an African, and I set my pride in my race over against a hostile public opinion".

It was this overwhelming hostility that Pixley ka Isaka Seme observed while growing up in what is today rural KwaZulu Natal, and also while studying in the US, that prompted him to strive for the self-determination of the African people.

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For this reason, in Seme's words, "the so-called African Native National Congress was to represent the views and interests of African people within the Union of South Africa's establishment".

We must grapple with the relevance of the "hostility" that Pixley ka Isaka Seme spoke of, and determine exactly what current forces are hostile to our agenda for change. My perspective is that, while a prevailing idealism lead to the popular embrace of non-racialism by the South African and international communities, the underlying dialectical dispositions of hostility along race, class and gender lines still persist and must be confronted and defeated.

Very importantly, we must also grapple with Seme's assertion that the African "has refused to camp forever on the borders of the industrial world; having learned that knowledge is power, he is educating his children".

Are we not found wanting in the education of our children? Do we really believe that the future of our country rests on the younger generation? What about teaching our children patriotism so that – after graduating as doctors, as nurses, as engineers, etc. – they will contribute to the regeneration of Africa instead of heading overseas? Have we not undermined Seme's assertion that those who are able to study abroad "return to their country like arrows, to drive darkness from the land"? Looking at our skills strategy and its implementation, can we truly share in Seme's sentiment that "his industrial and educational initiative, and his untiring devotion to these activities, must be regarded as positive evidences of this process of his regeneration"?

Of course, the ANC was confronted with other challenges in the decades that followed, more policy positions were debated and adopted, but those are beyond the scope of this presentation.

Today's policy challenges are illuminated by the mindset and works of Pixley ka Isaka Seme. History tells of other heroes and heroines of our struggle, but Seme was indeed the leading founder of the ANC, working together with other geniuses of his generation. From his life, we learn that we too, as individuals working in collectives, can contribute to shaping the future of our movement and the struggle of our people. 🌱

