

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 >>

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Asked by a journalist to comment on the passing of Ben Turok, I said, amongst other things, ‘Benny’s unflagging political courage marks him out as one who always led from the front’.



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



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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 determination to oppose them.

Yes, "It is the economy". And those who dominate and control it, in the last instance, continue to determine 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 propertied 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? >>

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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 South Africa. No political formation in this country dares to advocate racism! No one in South Africa today dares to admit they supported apartheid. Everyone today at least pays lip service to democracy!

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! **NA**

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