

SA pays tribute to a comrade of integrity

By Vishnu Padayachee with Robbie Van Niekerk

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*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 2019.¹ 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

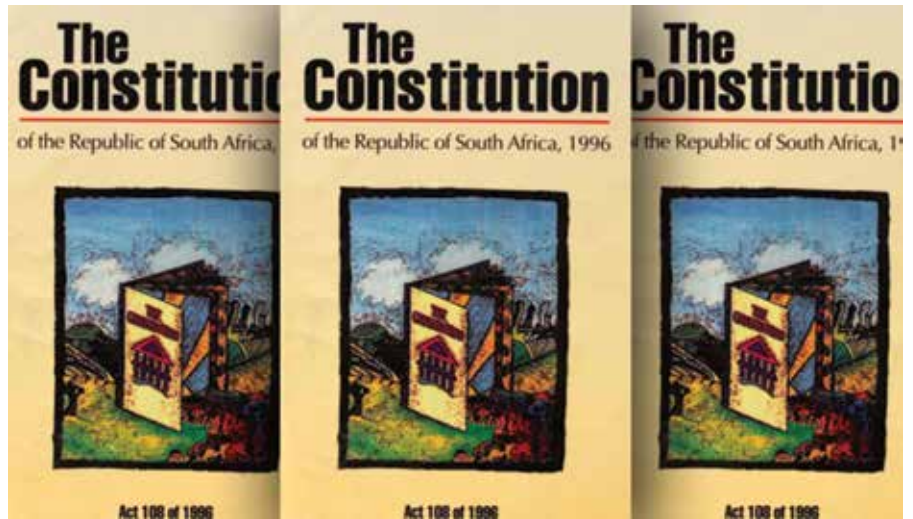
with passionate determination on the important strategic political and economic policy issues while others, in often more influential positions in the movement, sank cosily into the tactical silence of political cynicism, a thin veil for their personal self-interest. In an era characterised by an increasing 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 ►►

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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.

[I]t 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."³ 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 neo-liberal 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, ‘bilaterals’ 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.”⁴ 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

- 1 Padayachee, Vishnu and Van Niekerk, Robbie 2019. *Shadow of Liberation: Compromise and Contestation in the Economic and Social Policy Making of the African National Congress, 1943 – 1996*. Johannesburg, Wits University Press
- 2 Harris, Laurence. 1993. “South Africa’s Economic and Social Transformation: From ‘No Middle Road’ to ‘No Alternative’.” *Review of African Political Economy* 20 (57): pp 91–103
- 3 Quoted in Rapley, John 2017. *Twilight of the Money Gods, Economics as a religion and how it all went wrong*. London: Simon Schuster
- 4 Cabral, A 1981 ‘Tell No Lies, Claim No Easy Victories’, pp 123 – 125, in Turok, B (ed). *Revolutionary Thought in the 20th Century*. London: Zed Press 