

5th Alan Paton Lecture

- Page 1 -

ALAN PATON - LIBERALISM AND THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

PIETERMARITZBURG 3/9/96

Helen Suzman

I am, of course, very honoured at having been invited to give this address tonight in memory of Alan Paton. It's a particularly important occasion, because it is the 10th anniversary of his death and as we all know, it is the 50th Anniversary of the publication of that remarkable novel, "Cry the Beloved Country", which not only brought South Africa to the attention of the world, but as Alan Paton himself said, it made him famous.

I will not presume to give biographical details about Alan to this audience in this town where he was born, educated and spent most of his existence. You probably know more about him than I do. Suffice it to say that his life span of 85 years encompassed his work not only as a prolific writer, but also as a devout Christian, schoolmaster, prison reformer and politician. If you want to know more about this remarkable and versatile man, read Peter Alexander's biography published in 1994, and also Alan's own autobiographies - "Towards the Mountain" and "Journey Continued".

- Page 2 -

Cry the Beloved Country and his autobiographies were not his only books. His other books include two biographies - about Archbishop Clayton and Jan Hofmeyer; there was "Too Late the Phalarope", "Kontakion For You Departed", and "Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful". He gave hundreds of addresses here and abroad, and published numerous articles, some of which were published in a collection called "Save The Beloved Country" in 1987, the year before he died - a book which he dedicated to me - an unexpected honour indeed.

Some consider "Too late the Phalarope" to be a better book than "Cry". However, the huge success of "Cry" belies these critics : Statistics show that up to 1988, 15 million copies were sold, it has been translated into nineteen languages; it still sells 100 000 copies a year, and is used as a set book in schools and universities in many countries. (David's joke - the one who wrote the set book). "Cry" was dramatised and filmed. It remains one of the great best sellers of all time - a book written in biblical language with a heart-rending story and prophetic utterances.

I put a lot of work into this lecture, (although you may not think so), because I realised how many outstanding people have given the Alan Paton Memorial Lecture in previous years, and that if I wanted to produce anything which would remotely approach their standard of excellence, I would certainly have to do more than just rely on the spirit moving me. Last year the lecture was delivered by the former High Commissioner for India, His Excellency Gopalkrishna Gandhi. Two others before him were Peter Brown and Raymond Hoffenberg.

One of the other well known people who gave the Alan Paton Memorial Lecture in the past, was Dr van Zyl Slabbert. He delivered a lecture on 6 June 1993 entitled "Fashioning a New Role for Fashionable Liberalism". You will note the lecture was delivered before the first democratic election was held in South Africa in April 1994. In that lecture van Zyl says that if he could have had dinner with Alan Paton that night, there were three questions he would have liked to put to him. (1.) "Why did South African liberalism evoke such vehement negative responses among those struggling for liberation?" (2.) "Why has this suddenly died down?" and (3.) "What implications does this hold for liberal values in the future?" And he said he would like to reflect on these three questions.

Well, I would like to revisit two of those questions. Firstly I must say that I fully agree with the first proposition: that liberalism evoked vehement negative responses among those struggling for liberation in South Africa. Indeed I was on the receiving end of criticism from many people who accused me of giving legitimacy to an illegitimate government simply by sitting in Parliament. My answer to that was that I used Parliament to best advantage by putting probing questions, which evoked answers which, I might add, were freely used by my critics. "It's not my questions that bring South Africa into disrepute - it's your answers . I also exploited my position as an MP to expose all the heinous laws of oppression which the apartheid government put on the statute book, and subsequent effects thereof. This was particularly important during the frequent

- Page 4 -

states of emergency, especially in the '80s, when the media was subjected to strict censorship, and the press was forbidden to publish anything that was "unrest related".

There were, however, two exceptions to the censorship: anything emanating from the Courts or from Parliament could be reported. I used this latter exception to good effect during those periods to disclose what I knew about police behaviour in the townships. I also had information about the treatment of detainees from people who were subsequently released, or from their surviving relatives, and I was able to voice my objections strongly in Parliament. All this was reported in the press here and abroad. So, whatever the negative implications of my being in Parliament were, I believe I used my presence there to subvert government. I should mention too, that being an MP was the prime reason I had access to detainees and the prisoners on Robben Island and elsewhere.

Alan Paton was also on the receiving end of criticism from people in the liberation struggle, especially for his uncompromising opposition to the use of violence in the anti-apartheid campaign, and to economic sanctions and disinvestment. Indeed Alan Paton and I had a lot in common. We were both liberals - he was the leader of the small but courageous Liberal Party, which dissolved itself in 1968 when the Political Interference Act, which prohibited multi-racial political parties, was passed. Alan was a Liberal with a capital L. I was a liberal, still am, despite it being politically incorrect, a liberal with a little l. Both of us shared the same basic values,

- Page 5 -

firm believers and upholders of the rule of law, of an independent judiciary, of equal opportunity, of no discrimination on the basis of race, colour, gender, religion or of creed. Most of all, of course, we were both firm opponents of grand apartheid, of bantustans, of group areas and forced removals and the pass laws. And we were both in favour of freedom of expression, and of movement, of education for all, of the right to acquire and use skills, all the basic tenets of liberalism, which he adhered to until his death, which I still adhere to and always will do.

Perhaps what bound us together most closely in later years was our opposition to economic sanctions and disinvestment - a stand which made us very unpopular both with liberation struggle people inside the country, and with many of our friends outside South Africa. Both of us however, were adamant that we could not support a policy which, by and large, would harm most the people that it was meant to help, and that is of course, the mass of African workers who would lose their jobs, particularly in agriculture, mining and industry, as sanctions closed markets abroad. He and I were adamant on this subject - he in fact, wrote a rather curious article entitled "My Nightmare", which was published in "Save the Beloved Country", in 1987. He described a dream in which he had become the President of the World Disinvestment Campaign, and of course he was now welcomed on campuses that previously would have shouted him down. The dream or nightmare ended with a black woman coming to see him carrying a child, and I now quote, "She gives me the child and I see that it is dead. 'Why do you give this to me?' 'Because it is yours.' 'How

- Page 6 -

can it be mine? I have never seen you before.' 'You took its life, and therefore it is yours.' The woman goes out and points to waiting women, saying 'They will bring their children to you as well.' And that, he states, is when he immediately gave up any idea of supporting disinvestment. He goes on to say that there is only one firm statement that he can make on disinvestment "I will have nothing to do with it. I will not by any written or spoken word, give it any support whatsoever".

Paton admitted that he (like me) had a simplistic understanding of the situation. He ignored the views of those black South Africans who supported disinvestment and economic sanctions, because most of those, he pointed out, would not be the ones to suffer hunger. Many of them were safely placed in employment. He repeated a statement which had been made in fact by Archbishop Tutu. "We do not mind suffering, we are used to suffering", but of course, Paton said, this was often a declaration by those who would suffer least.

I took the same view, I knew that economic sanctions and disinvestment would lead to widespread unemployment, particularly of black people, and in a country with no social security safety net, except old age pensions and disability grants, this would mean real suffering, and inevitably would lead to an escalation of crime and violence. And so, of course, it has proved to be. It is true, and I have admitted it, that the sanctions and disinvestment campaign did expedite the ending of apartheid, but at great cost. As I put it in an article, it cured the disease but nearly killed the patient.

Well, as I said, both Alan Paton and I were at the receiving end of a lot of criticism from people who strongly supported sanctions and disinvestment, but we stood by our convictions - he to the end of his days, and I to the end of my parliamentary career, and I still do.

Thus Van Zyl was correct to say that there had been hostility towards liberals, especially from persons involved in the armed struggle for liberation. He quotes, for example, Dr Neville Alexander's, statement that "liberalism is a greater danger in the long run to the struggle of the oppressed than facism, for the very reason that it seems to speak with the tongue of the people". In other words, Neville Alexander believed that anything that blunted the sharp tool of the revolution, was in fact an enemy of transformation. And van Zyl also quoted Steve Biko, who targetted white liberals as the main danger to black emancipation.

However, I have to question van Zyl's proposition that such hostility to liberalism suddenly died down, and that as a consequence liberal values became fashionable and have persevered. He asks why, and his explanation is that at that stage (i.e. 1993) the constitution for the new South Africa was being thrashed out at CODESA and people had to give up their ideological stands on the right and on the left, and settle for compromises, and in so doing, it seems, all the basic liberal values were then entrenched in our constitution.

- Page 8 -

There is no doubt, as has been proclaimed, that the South African version is probably the most liberal constitution in the world. The Bill of Rights is extremely wide in its prohibitions and in its protections. One has only to look at the Equality Clause, (Clause 9), which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, religion, colour, sexual orientation, marital status, ethnic origin, age, disability, culture, language etc, and thus covers practically every aspect of life. What should be noted as particularly important is the inclusion in the South African Bill of Rights, not only a prohibition against vertical discrimination, i.e. the state against the individual, but also against horizontal discrimination; in other words, I as an individual, cannot discriminate against you as an individual. So the Equality Clause is very far-reaching indeed and it is justiciable, though it is tempered by the general limitations clause contained in the Bill of Rights.

Then I should mention, which is something not found in many other constitutions, the socio-economic rights in the South African version - contained in Clauses 24, 26, 27 and 29 of the Bill of Rights - which give everyone access to housing, education, health care, food, water, social security and environment as justiciable rights. Again, there is a limitation, in this case it is the phrase "within available resources" of the organs of state, which have to make such access available. In the constitutions of most other countries, with the possible exception of Brazil and Portugal, socio-economic rights are included as a directive aim of government, and are not justiciable rights.

Therefore I suppose it is arguable, as indeed I have argued, that using the Constitution as the yardstick, liberalism as a creed has triumphed in South Africa. Thus in the period immediately after the acceptance of the Constitution, van Zyl's assertion that hostility towards liberalism died down can be justified - but contrary to his conclusion, enunciated in his third question to Alan Paton, this attitude has not persevered. This is demonstrated, for example, by the frequent articles in the Press by those self-appointed exponents of public morality, Messrs Thami Mazwai and Jon Qwelane and other people, who play the race card against what they term "conservative neo-liberals" with monotonous regularity.

Further examples of the ongoing debate about the role of liberals can be found in several articles in a book published recently by the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung - entitled "Liberals - Watchdogs or Hypocrites". Thus for example, Kader Asmal, Minister of Water Affairs and Ronald Roberts, a New York lawyer, in an article entitled "Liberalism's Hollow Core", allege that "Liberalism has become South Africa's last credible instrument of privilege". And so it seems that Paton's most famous words - uttered by the Rev. Msimangu in "Cry" - "I have one great fear in my heart - that one day when they turn to loving, they will find we are turned to hating", are, ironically, especially relevant to the attitude of many blacks today towards liberals who, while they have not always turned to loving, have always opposed race discrimination.

- Page 10 -

Perhaps this hostility would be less harsh if Alan's definition of liberalism - shared by most of us - was more widely known. Alan defined what he meant by liberalism at a lecture he delivered at Yale University in 1973. He said, "By liberalism I don't mean the creed of any party or any century. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism and a love of freedom". Not much to hate in that definition!

Having disagreed with van Zyl's second assumption that hostility to South African liberalism has died down, I don't need to dwell on his third question to Paton - i.e. the implications this might have for liberal values in the future. What I would like to dwell on is what Alan Paton might have made of the new South Africa with its liberal constitution.

Alan Paton would, of course, have welcomed the disappearance from the Statute Book in the new South Africa of the oppressive laws that so bedevilled the lives of the majority of our citizens during the apartheid regime - the Race Classification Act, the Group Areas Act, the Land Acts, the Separate Amenities Act, and especially the repeal of the Bantu Education Act. (I am glad he lived long enough to see the repeal of the pass laws, the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act in the mid-80s, all of which he detested.)

Alas, he did not live to enjoy the experience of voting in April 1994

- Page 11 -

in our first democratic election with universal franchise, which as leader of the Liberal Party, he had passionately supported.

As far as the constitution is concerned, I believe that Alan Paton would have criticised the concentration of power in the hands of the central government, as he was always a firm supporter of federalism. He would, however, have welcomed the Bill of Rights, since it upholds the basic values he always advocated. He would have approved the establishment of the Constitutional Court as the highest Court in the land, with powers to strike down any act passed by Parliament which is in conflict with the Bill of Rights. I think, however, that he would not have accorded other aspects of the constitution his uncritical approval. His discerning eye would have observed that there was perhaps too much emphasis on rights and not enough on responsibility, and that a culture of entitlement would inevitably result. This would certainly have conflicted with his over-riding respect for self-reliance, merit and achievement, and with his basic belief in discipline which he demonstrated, often too forcibly, as head of Diepkloof Reformatory.

I am unsure what his reaction to the TRC would have been. He no doubt would have given the goal of reconciliation his full support, and like all of us, he would have been appalled at the revelations of torture and murder that surfaced at the TRC hearings. But whether he would have approved of the manner in which amnesty has been granted to so many dubious characters on claims of political motives, is doubtful. His close friends in the Liberal Party tell me Alan was

- Page 12 -

ambivalent about abolition of the death penalty. Though against the death penalty in principle, I understand he would have retained it in cases of murder with exceptional brutality.

Most of all, Alan Paton would certainly have cautioned that a liberal constitution would not guarantee that the principles it contained would be implemented e.g. African states and the Soviet Union. He would have been alarmed at threats to freedom of the press and the strong reaction to criticism from government sources. He would have sounded an urgent warning about the need to maintain a strong civil society and a watchful parliamentary opposition to protect the basic liberal principles he espoused.

Then too, Alan Paton might well have questioned the wisdom of laws passed in the new South Africa, such as the Labour Relations Act and affirmative action measures such as the Employment Equity Bill, which like economic sanctions, could inhibit economic growth and decrease employment opportunities, and he would have strongly disapproved of the nepotism, corruption and maladministration to be found in the new South Africa, and he would have noted with dismay that crime and violence had escalated alarmingly.

Let me remind you that "Cry" was published in 1948 shortly before the National Party took power and long before dinner party conversations were all about crime and violence. Here let me use his prophetic words: "Have no doubt it is fear in the land, for what can men do when so many have grown lawless? Who can enjoy this lovely land...and the sun that falls down on the earth when there is fear in

- Page 13 -

the heart? Who can walk quietly in the shadow of the jacarandas when their beauty has grown to danger? Who can lie peacefully in bed while the darkness holds some secret? What lovers can lie sweetly under the stars when menace grows with the measure of their seclusion. There are voices crying what must be done - a hundred, a thousand voices. But what do they help if one seeks for counsel, for one cries this and one cries that, and another cries something that is neither this nor that..."

Who knows how we shall fashion a land of peace, where black outnumbered white so greatly. We do not know, we do not know, we shall live from day to day and put more locks on the doors and get a fine, fierce dog when the fine fierce bitch next door has pups, and hold onto our handbags more tenaciously, and the beauty of the trees by night and the raptures of lovers under the stars, these things we shall forego. We shall be careful and knock this off our lives, and knock that off our lives, and hedge ourselves about with safety and precaution. And our lives shall shrink, but they shall be the lives of superior beings, and we shall live with fear, but at least it will not be a fear of the unknown."

But finally if I were to judge how Alan Paton would have weighed up the pros and cons of the New South Africa, I believe he would have proclaimed that on the Richter scale of democracy, the overall state of the nation is better than it was 10 years ago. One must remember that corruption and nepotism were also rife in the old South Africa. No one in the new South Africa has to fear being confined by a

- Page 14 -

banning order - such as was endured by Peter Brown for many years - severely restricting his freedom of movement. And no-one in the new South Africa needs to fear that his passport will be confiscated, a deprivation suffered by Alan in December 1960 curtailing travel abroad for some ten years, and thus denying him honour and recognition he would otherwise have enjoyed. One must weigh the removal of apartheid laws and of institutionalised violations of human rights against all the negative factors in the new South Africa. To him, as to me, race classification, pass laws, group areas, forced removals, detention without trial, solitary confinement under the Terrorism Act and all the hideous violations of human rights in the old South Africa, recently revealed at the TRC, were just as appalling as hijacking and robbery and rape.

Alan Paton would have agreed that there are plus factors today that should be added to the scale - such as free medical attention for pregnant women and children under the age of six, water and electricity supplied to thousands of communities hitherto denied such basic necessities, primary health care available in rural areas. (I am not sure whether his religious convictions would have allowed him to approve the Termination of Pregnancy Act, though I would certainly have tried to persuade him that this Act will save thousands of women from having to resort to dangerous back street abortions.)

- Page 15 -

Finally, Alan Paton would have appreciated South Africa's present standing in the world - no longer a pariah nation - readmitted to the Commonwealth, to the United Nations, now a member of OAU and a leading member of SADC. He would have blessed the disappearance of economic sanctions and academic boycotts, and the fact that our Head of State, President Mandela, is the most popular and sought-after leader in the world.

As for our standing in international sport, had he been alive in 1995 and observed the wild enthusiasm of the entire nation at South Africa's success in world rugby, he would have thought that his "one hope for our country" had indeed come to pass - as he put it in "Cry" - "that is when white men and black men desiring neither power nor money, but desiring only the good of their own country, come together to work for it."