

Beyers Naudé's prophetic voice is more than a timepiece to remind us of the horrors of apartheid

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On the anniversary of his 100th birthdate, Beyers Naudé is honoured here in Uppsala, as well as in Stellenbosch, in Cape Town, in Durban, Alexandra outside Johannesburg, UNISA in Pretoria and other places.

Beyers Naudé's quest for egalité was fundamental and applies today as it did under apartheid. It applies in South Africa as it applies elsewhere in the world.

Maya Angelou the American writer said, "History, despite its wrenching pain cannot be un-lived. But, if faced with courage, need not be lived again." These are compelling words. She calls on us to remember but equally to stand vigil lest what happened before happens again.

Howard Zinn, historian, playwright and author wrote, "The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvellous victory."

I chose these quotations because they evoke different yet complementary aspects of Oom Bey, and why his life warrants our attention. Beyers did not only help lead us out of apartheid, his prophecy includes a demand for a just and equal society, *and as part of his quest for egalité* he shunned a lavish lifestyle – yes even accepted insecurity out of solidarity with others. If Beyers was with us today, he would still be driving a lovingly and personally serviced, fifty year old Peugeot 404; his means to get to meetings against xenophobia in informal settlements, whilst at the same time supporting those campaigning for land, housing and sanitation.

Slowly, very slowly it dawns on collective South Africa that the right to cast our vote since 1994 did not result in all that we hoped for and expected. 1994 did provide significant gains for those who most needed

freedom from the racial dispensation, but it continued to leave the majority:

- without a better education,
- desperate and in grinding poverty,
- and handicapped in systemic inequality.

To throw off the yoke of apartheid *was* momentous and required an arduous struggle with enormous sacrifices. Let us always be thankful that the advent of democracy outlawed racist conduct, gave us an exceptional constitution, an independent judiciary and a Bill of Rights to be proud of.

However, the transformation project remains substantially deficient and unfulfilled. This is because of failings by those who promised change in the name of revolution. Their poor decisions, their vulgar indulgence in wining and dining (politicians and civil servants alike), their attachment to ostentation and lavish fashion shows in Parliament and unacceptable, glitzy cars, and now the rise of a new bigotry within their own ranks, combine to threaten the gains of 1994. Our current rulers have it in them to take us into a new darkness – I don't mean the darkness caused by Eskom (our power utility). The ANC's detachment from the poor happened at lightning speed. We are now at the bottom of the inequality rankings globally.

We have a problem! The new political elite is in a tight embrace with the old white moneyed elite, who in turn are in cosy cahoots with a sprinkling of indebted black capitalists. They are stunningly unconcerned about the plight of the poor and rely, like apartheid, on the police, to quell unrests. Unrest, as yet un-coordinated, now erupts somewhere in South Africa every single day. At times our highways, the arteries between major towns, have been disrupted and traffic prevented from passing. In suppressing the revolt, the guarantees in our Bill of Rights are already, regularly being violated. We may indeed anticipate states of emergency, like under apartheid. I believe that it is not premature to ask whether this massive political failure opens the gates for a Julius Malema, leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters as dictator, not to say Führer, assisted by Mcebo Dlamini, a student leader at a pre-eminent university who in recent days spoke of his admiration for Adolf Hitler.

Where would Beyers Naudé be in all of this if he was with us today?

Let me explain:

Oom Bey was out of view from 1977 until his house arrest (“banning”) was lifted in 1984. But he did not sit and do nothing. In those seven long years Beyers’ prophesy was augmented with radical thought and action, taking his ever deeply held Christian belief into the politics of the day. For him there was no contradiction. The history I highlight to you here this morning, I believe, leaves his integrity intact and makes his stature all the greater.

The thread throughout is that Beyers implores us never to drop the baton of struggle for the defence of our fundamental rights and for true equality.

In a letter dated 27th October 1977, a week after the Christian Institute, all the staff, including Beyers, was banned, he wrote,

“As I have indicated formerly, I’m willing to serve wherever my presence could make the greatest and most meaningful contribution. In view of the situation created by the recent events it seems to me to be clear that for the foreseeable future my task is to remain where I am but we are considering this situation as well as the implications of staying or leaving and we shall keep you informed”.

A few weeks later – in late 1977 - Beyers briefly, but seriously, considered leaving South Africa and make common cause with Oliver Tambo and the ANC, and with Mangasuthu Buthelezi in exile, in Lusaka. The idea was to break the stalemate that apartheid had forced Southern Africa into. But, a year later, in a letter dated 9th October 1978, Beyers writes:

“My future position and role: I want to make it quite clear that as long as God gives me the necessary mental and physical strength, I shall continue with the work of the CI. I have no intention of withdrawing or ‘retiring’ or discarding the task in which I am involved. This is how I see my position here in SA and, however difficult it may be, I hope to continue to provide the leadership here in our country with the full awareness that a moment may arrive where I may find it impossible to continue – but if and

when that moment comes, I shall clearly say so and share my position with the group”.

These are extracts from letters smuggled out of the country. They, and many more, exist in his own distinctive handwriting.

In the early months of 1978 Beyers and the ‘group’ (insiders, mostly former staff members of the CI) were involved in drawing up a policy paper, the intent of which was to build a framework and role for an illegal underground Christian Institute. The document debates

- how and on what basis to work with the ANC, the Black Consciousness Movement and possibly with Inkatha.
- It deals with the role and task of individual Christians and of the Churches in South Africa.
- It deals with the need to provide on-the-spot analyses of the situation as a tool to challenge the churches’ ambivalent stand towards apartheid, inside South Africa and in Europe and North America.
- It foresees promoting reconciliation and unity between “liberation groups”,
- provide pastoral care to exiles and training opportunities for those apartheid was failing,
- the possibility of establishing a “Steve Biko Institute”,
- support for internal popular mobilisation,
- co-operation with the OAU and the UNO
- and up-scaling non-violent struggle methods, without seeking to replace the armed struggle pursued by the ANC and PAC.

Although such a structure was never formally established, Beyers lived and acted by this programme every day of his eight-year banning order.

He was invited to the first Groote Schuur talks as a negotiator on the side of the ANC. However, he was not seen in any subsequent negotiations. Was he dropped because his moral Christian Socialism did not fit into the modalities of what the parties to our new dispensation had in mind? I don’t know the answer to this question. Even when he was already confined to a wheelchair he warned against the ease with which the new ruling party immersed themselves into comfort and luxury, and then sank into corruption on an unprecedented scale. As could be expected from him, Beyers was already a step ahead and could not be part of the compromises the incoming order made.

In another action that involved both Ilse (his wife) and Beyers, they engaged very considerable financial resources to change the Dutch Reformed Church from within. Through travel and exposure to the ecumenical developments in Europe and elsewhere, they wanted to expose others to a similar experience that had helped the two of them change their own outlook. Later this year, I believe we will see a new publication that details how Ilse and Beyers quietly ran the Christian Fellowship Trust. From 1965 to 1995, for thirty years, they sent over 400 persons overseas to experience what they themselves had experienced. It was Beyers' intention in this way to change the DRC from within.

The above lifts the lid, ever so slightly, on the secret, the subversive, political but deeply Christian, Beyers Naudé.

Beyers should be celebrated for all of what he was and did. We must allow no one to sanitise Beyers. To honour Oom Bey, he needs to be as uncomfortable on our consciences today as he was yesterday.

Beyers' roots in the struggle for Afrikaner economic rights in the face of British Imperial dominance made him know the concept of class. From 1977 on Beyers spoke, wrote and sought to understand better the system of exploitation of one class by another. His efforts to understand Black Consciousness and its uneasy relationship to class occupied his mind. All of it led him to seek economic equality, in a political order that did not create and then compound the distortions capitalism has created and continues to create. He was not content merely to oppose corruption and authoritarian trends whether before, or after 1994. In my view Beyers may indeed be remembered as a Christian socialist, as a humanitarian socialist.

Beyers' respect and recognition of every single individual, irrespective of their station in life is well known, so is his far-sightedness. But, there is another side of Beyers that, in my view, warrants consideration. It is this: his concern and care for the wrongdoer. He condemned no one and went to incredible lengths to redeem those condemned for whatever reason. Beyers knew ostracism. He spoke with pain about his Christmas holidays in Onrust, in the Southern Cape, when the morning walk to buy the Afrikaans and the English newspapers felt like walking a gauntlet. For historic reasons number of top Afrikaner leaders [many

lived in Onrust, a seaside resort] bought their papers at the same shop and despite Beyers knowing them from the time before he broke ranks, they ignored him.

I want to take Beyers' concern for the ostracised to another level. Those who voted for apartheid, those whom the white English, but not them alone, conveniently and gratuitously refer to as 'those Afrikaners' are still today in many, many instances considered near pariahs. The term "Afrikaner" or "Boer" is so very often used in a loaded way. The antipathy toward the apartheid proponent may have justification [for this] but I think Beyers would want to reach out to them. I have always felt it scandalous how the last apartheid President, FW de Klerk and his elite gang walked away from their most loyal constituency and take none of the blame. Much worse than that, de Klerk et al made next to no effort to re-educate his people and lead them out of the darkness the National Party moulded them into.

It cannot be right that we leave tens of thousands of apartheid adherents to smoulder in their isolation, with nearly no effort undertaken for them to be redeemed from their own past. Nation building cannot happen when one sector of our people is designated to a ghetto of finger pointing. Somehow, it is thought that they should discover by themselves how to be liberated. I submit that Beyers would not have been blind to this aspect of the incomplete transition we are in today. Beyers would not be seen amongst the legions of victors, through the ages, who self-righteously, point accusing fingers at 'them'.

In an interview with Beyers not yet published, Beyers, true to character asks: "What is there that I can do to share in building a new and just society?" These are his words spoken not prior to 1994 but just before the year 2000. Beyers' quest for egalité has not remotely been achieved. I urge you to honour him appropriately.

Through knowledge and analyses of his life, I urge you to locate Beyers historically where he correctly belongs. Guard against a memory of Beyers that is an annual ritual, that provides a warm and fuzzy feeling about a hero of the past. Most of all Beyers' life is an inspiration to us to never drop the baton of the struggle for equality.