

# REFLECTIONS ON

# GRAAFF-REINET

by Peter Brown

Although there were many contacts between Liberal Party and Pan-Africanist Congress members during the few brief years of the PAC's official existence 20 years ago, I did not meet Robert Sobukwe at that time. In fact my one and only meeting with him took place only a few months before his death, in Groote Schuur Hospital, and lasted barely a quarter of an hour. Theo Kotze of the Christian Institute (both of them now banned), took me to see him. It was an inspired thought on his part, on the only day I spent in Cape Town in the whole of 1977, and one for which I shall always be grateful. For, to meet Robert Sobukwe was for me, at any rate, a quite exceptional experience. He had just had a massive operation, should still have been in bed but wasn't, was still very weak, was only just recovering the use of his voice, yet still gave the impression of immense strength. Many people have remarked on the fact that, in spite of all he had been subjected to, there was no bitterness in him. Nor, from my brief meeting with him, was there any despair or any frustration – only a great sadness that the prospects for the full development of South Africa's enormous human and material potential were being frittered away.

So, on March 11th, one went to Sobukwe's funeral in his birthplace of Graaff-Reinet, to honour this remarkable man. What did one find there and with what thoughts did one come away?

We travelled to Graaff-Reinet not knowing at what time the memorial service was to be held and, in fact, we only reached the town just in time to join the funeral procession. The result was that the only seats we could find were so far from the central platform, where it was set up in the middle of the Graaff-Reinet Showgrounds, that we could neither see who was on it nor, later, exactly what was happening round it. We learnt only afterwards that the organisers of the funeral service had been forced to change the programme the previous day and that Helen Suzman and Benjamin Pogrand, a very old friend of Robert Sobukwe's, had been removed from the list of speakers.

When a protesting crowd gathered round the platform and refused to disperse, in spite of repeated appeals over the microphone, it was still some time before we discovered that Chief Gatsha Buthelezi was on that platform and what that protesting crowd was demanding was that he should leave. All one sensed, as the appeals over the microphone became more desperate, was a steadily rising tension in the arena, until it was almost at breaking-point. It was at this point that Chief Buthelezi was persuaded to leave. Those moments between the time he stepped down from the platform and was finally out of the arena, seemed to last for ever. My own view is that he was lucky to get out of there alive. One stumble, one better-directed stone, and anything might have happened. As it was, the Chief and those who escorted him out showed great courage in the face of the most intense hostility. The hostility which forced Sonny Leon and the Transkei representatives and any other black person who had worked "within the system" to leave was not as intense, but still very strong. They had to leave, but they did so with dignity.

Whoever invited Chief Buthelezi to speak at Robert Sobukwe's funeral turns out to have done him a grave disservice and to have shown themselves to be quite out of touch with present political tensions within black society. Most of the black people attending the funeral were bound to be people who went to pay tribute to Sobukwe for the stand he had taken against apartheid from **outside** its institutions. It was inevitable that they should resent positions of prominence being given to people who had decided to work for change from **within** those institutions – a course of action which they claim is a hindrance to the liberation struggle and whose advocates must be discredited.

Apart from any other considerations it was clearly of political importance for people working within the system to be on the platform at the funeral service. And to those who felt it would be wrong for people who had adopted an approach rejected by Sobukwe to gain credit from his funeral it was important that they should not be there.

A clash of some sort could hardly be avoided. It was the threatening violence of the form it took which was so disturbing.

What would Robert Sobukwe himself have felt about all this? Would he have regarded it as wrong to have homeland and CRC leaders given a prominent place at his funeral or would he have regarded it as an occasion for healing rituals? I don't know. All I do know is that he would not have approved of the manner of their going. I think he would have been horrified at the manner of Chief Buthelezi's ejection and at the removal of Benjie Pogrand from the list of speakers, for I can't see how this last can be regarded as anything but a racist act. I agree that, by virtue of his unique position in their liberation struggle, Robert Sobukwe had achieved a status which made his funeral much more than a private affair, and that it was right that the occasion should be used to promote the aims to which he had committed himself and to restate his vision of the new South African society. But it was not right to use his funeral to push views which were not his. If people thought it inappropriate to have homeland representatives on the platform so too was it inappropriate to remove them in the manner in which they were removed, so too was the exclusion of an old friend like Benjie Pogrand from the programme and so too was the tenor of some of the speeches and the songs, which were frankly racist. But let me say at once that such statements were very much outnumbered by others which reminded the world that Sobukwe's vision was no racist dream. After all, what he wanted was a Pan-Africanist Africa whose slogan would indeed be "Africa for the Africans", but which would regard as an African any person of any race who made his permanent home in and gave his undivided loyalty to Africa and expected no privileged treatment there. In spite of everything that happened at the funeral and some of the things that were said at it one came away with the feeling that the Sobukwe vision was still valid for most black people. There was certainly no feeling in those show-grounds of being a white speck in a sea of black hostility, photographers and pressmen moved about in the crowd with complete freedom and the address of the white minister of the local Methodist Circuit was received no differently from addresses by other ministers.

But after Graaff-Reinet, what of the future? What effect will the rejection of Chief Buthelezi have on the Inkatha movement and his new Black Alliance and his international position?

I think that the Black Alliance has suffered a setback and that the Chief could suffer serious international embarrassment particularly in Africa, though I very much doubt if the growth of Inkatha will be affected. It may even grow faster than it might otherwise have done, but for the wrong reasons — Zulu pride reacting to an insult to Kwa-Zulu's leading figure. Such a swing would be directed more against the young black radicals than against apartheid, which is what Inkatha is primarily concerned to oppose. Nor does it serve any purpose to write off the people who forced Chief Buthelezi to leave that funeral as irresponsible and impudent "puppies". Some of them may well be that but most are nothing of the sort. They are tough, brave and committed and they represent the new black mood which has been evident since Soweto. This is not a pausing mood. It is here to stay until black aspirations are met and it will become an increasingly powerful influence in shaping the future of our country. Nor is it correct to say that it was only a small group of young people who wanted Chief Buthelezi and the others to leave the funeral. Certainly they were the

activists but there was no sign from anyone of any age in the part of the audience where I was sitting that they thought it anything but right and proper that the people who left the funeral should have had to leave — and if they didn't like the manner of their going, they didn't say so. I suspect that there are a growing number of black urban areas in South Africa, where Inkatha and the Black Alliance could not rely on having friendly public meetings unless the area has a large Zulu population. The new mood of young black urban South Africa holds too wide a sway for that. Yet what happened at Graaff-Reinet tells only half the story. Chief Buthelezi remains potentially an extremely powerful figure in South Africa. Inkatha is developing into a mass movement, whatever its critics may say. It is drawing into political activity a large body of people who have never been involved before and, like the new black radicalism, it is destined to become a more and more important element on our political scene. It would be a great pity if the two movements were to continue to waste their energies fighting one another, which is what some of the bitter things said since Graaff-Reinet suggest they might end up doing.

Is the Government pleased by what happened at Graaff-Reinet? It must be very short-sighted if it is. It may find something consoling in seeing the differences between black opponents of apartheid so dramatically exposed, but those differences are not differences about the acceptability of apartheid, on which there is complete agreement. They are differences on how to get rid of it. Chief Buthelezi and those who work with him, grew up, on the whole, before 1948, in a society which, although in its actions it increasingly excluded them from its political organs, in its words held out the hope that one day all rights would be open to them. Black people were not to be rejected forever, only for the time being.

It is understandable, therefore, that with this background they should still hope to bring change through negotiating from within the system and trying to build a sufficiently powerful base there to force the Government to listen to them. Young black people have grown up never knowing anything but apartheid, a policy which totally rejects them as potential South African citizens. Why should they see any hope for change in working through a system built on such a total rejection of them? Yet, apart from a fringe group which would probably only be happy when it saw the last white person sailing away over the horizon, what they want is the same as Chief Buthelezi wants, full South African citizenship within a single country.

The Government's dilemma is that what both groups want is what it doesn't want to give, but unless the Buthelezi approach soon shows that it can produce results, that fringe element will start growing fast. Then where will the future of Afrikanerdom be?

Can the bitter differences revealed at Graaff-Reinet ever be bridged? If they are not, the future for all South Africans looks more ominous than ever. And one has only to ask the question to be struck at once by the great damage we have suffered through having Robert Sobukwe shut up like a pariah and held up as an ogre before white South Africa these past 18 years. For with him as a free man and with his vast prestige in all sections of the black community, things might never have come to this pass. Which raises another question which came to my mind on the way back from Graaff-Reinet. How much longer can we afford to have a man of the stature of Nelson Mandela cut out of our political life? □

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