

FREEDOM FOR MY PEOPLE
The Autobiography of Z. K. Matthews:
Southern Africa 1901 to 1968

Memoir by
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Provincial Executive for the manner in which they have discharged their duties, especially during my absence overseas. As I said in the message I sent to the branches recently, 'I make no apology for making special mention of the distinguished work done by Dr J. Z. L. Njongwe of Port Elizabeth, who took over the duties of Acting President, at such short notice and during such an eventful period in the history of our struggle. His fearless and inspired leadership, his untiring efforts and his selfless devotion to the cause of Africa were in no small measure responsible for the remarkable achievements of the African National Congress (Cape) in the Campaign which made such an indelible impression upon South Africa. In this work he was ably supported by the Provincial Secretary, Mr Matji and other members of our Provincial Executive and by our branch officials throughout the Province. All of them, one and all, acquitted themselves like true sons and daughters of Africa. This was due, among other things, to the admirable and able support which they received from the rank and file of our members. When our principal office-bearers were compelled to relinquish their duties owing to various bans imposed upon them, other members stepped into the breach. In this connection I want to express my personal thanks and the thanks of the organisation to the Rev W. B. Tshume who succeeded Dr Njongwe as Acting President, and Rev A. A. Tsekelesa who temporarily took over the duties of Provincial Secretary after the conference held in February 1953.

I trust that in all our deliberations we shall be inspired by a sense of the gravity of the issues which will be placed before us and the responsibility we owe to those we represent here.

'Africa's cause must triumph, Afrika!'

The offending words are in the paragraph beginning

Various groups in the country as you know are considering the idea of a national convention at which all groups might be represented to consider our national problems on an all-inclusive basis. . . . I wonder whether the time has not come for the African National Congress to consider the question of convening a national convention, a congress of the people, representing all the people of this country irrespective of race or colour, to draw up a Freedom Charter for the democratic South Africa of the future. Once the principle of the establishment of such a Congress of the People was accepted, the details of its implementation could be worked out either by the National Executive or by an *ad hoc* committee entrusted with that special duty.

Little did I realize when I uttered those words that I was laying the foundation of a charge of treason to be laid later against those who associated themselves with this innocent idea of the Congress of the People. At this Cradock Conference it was resolved that this idea of the Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter should be sent forward to the National Executive for inclusion in the Agenda of the National Conference to be held in December 1953. At the National Conference, which was held in Queenstown, the idea of the Congress of the People was discussed and approved. The National Executive was instructed to work out the details of convening such a Congress and in particular to seek the co-operation of other national organizations working among or with non-white groups in promoting the idea of the Congress of the People.

The first post-Conference meeting of the National Executive of the African National Congress was held in Natal in March 1954. At that meeting, which I attended, it was decided that steps should be taken to give effect to the resolution regarding the Congress of the People by inviting the National Executives of the South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured People's Organization, and the South African Congress of Democrats, to a preliminary meeting to discuss the idea, the meeting to be held in Durban. After I returned home I received a letter from the President-General, Chief A. J. Luthuli, asking me to prepare a memorandum on the idea of the Congress of the People to be placed before the meeting of the National Executives of the organizations to be invited by the African National Congress to consider the idea of the Congress of the People. As the person who had first mooted this idea, I agreed to put down a few thoughts about it on paper as a basis for discussion. In the meantime this idea had captivated the minds of a number of the members of our organization, and people who had any suggestions on the subject forwarded them to me as the prime mover of the idea. Therefore when I drew up the memorandum I had before me suggestions which had come from various individuals indicating their views on the significance of the idea and how it might be implemented. I naturally had my own approach to the subject.

Here again, when I drafted this statement, I regarded it as a perfectly innocent document and did not realize that it would later figure so prominently in the Treason Trial. For when the Crown Prosecutor outlined his case at the beginning of the Preparatory Examination on 19 December 1956, his very first reference was to

the Cradock Conference of the African National Congress (Cape) of August 1953, and to the memorandum drafted by me on the Congress of the People. In the raid carried out at my home in September 1955 the police had, among other things, seized copies of this memorandum as well as copies of the suggested drafts which had been sent to me by various individuals. They were not able to distinguish between my memorandum and the suggestions which I had received—all of them were attributed to me, and offending paragraphs were picked out at random and included in the Prosecutor's address. It seems that the paragraph to which most exception was taken was the following:

The main task of the Congress will be to draw up a 'Freedom Charter' for all peoples and groups in South Africa. From such a Congress ought to come a Declaration which will inspire all the peoples of South Africa with fresh hope for the future, which will turn the minds of the people away from the sterile and negative struggles of the past and the present to a positive programme of freedom in our lifetime. Such a Charter properly conceived as a mirror of the future South African Society can galvanise the people of South Africa into action and make them go over into the offensive against the reactionary forces at work in this country, instead of being perpetually on the defensive, fighting rearguard actions all the time.

The reference to 'action' and 'going over into the offensive' and 'fighting rearguard actions all the time' were apparently regarded as reference to proposed 'violent action of a military nature directed against the safety and independence of the State'. The only explanation I can find for this alarm over such innocent metaphorical expression is that, owing to our bilingualism in South Africa, we are becoming less and less able to follow idiomatic English usage.

This memorandum which I drafted was eventually placed before a joint meeting of the national executives of the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured Peoples' Organization and the South African Congress of Democrats. The meeting was held in Natal and the African National Congress put forward the memorandum as a basis for discussion. The idea of working for the convening of a Congress of the People was agreed to in principle, but the method of implementing it suggested in paragraph twelve of the memorandum was specifically rejected as being too cumbersome. Instead it was agreed to set up a National Action Council consisting of a number

of representatives of the different sponsoring organizations to work out the details of how to give effect to this resolution, including the possible extension of an invitation to other bodies not represented at the meeting, to join in sponsoring the Congress of the People. It was eventually agreed that the National Action Council should consist of five representatives from each sponsoring organization, and be empowered to make recommendations to the joint executives of the sponsoring organizations, which alone would be empowered to take executive action on the recommendations of the National Action Council. It was further suggested that the National Action Council should consist preferably of members of the executives of the sponsoring organizations resident in the Transvaal so as to make it easier for them to meet, as frequent meetings would be necessary especially in the early stages of the Campaign.

I was not elected to the National Action Council and never had an opportunity to attend any of its meetings. At this time I withdrew temporarily from African National Congress activities. This was because I was appointed Acting Principal of the University College of Fort Hare during the absence, on six months' sick leave (May-November 1954) of Professor C. P. Dent, the Principal. Dr J. Z. L. Njongwe of Port Elizabeth took over my duties as President of African National Congress (Cape) and also my *ex officio* position as member of the National Executive. I did, however, attend the Annual Conference of the ANC (Cape) at Uitenhage in June 1954, presided over by Dr Njongwe as Acting President. The President-General, Chief A. J. Luthuli, and Walter Sisulu, the Secretary-General of the ANC, were given a thunderous welcome by the thousands of people who attended our open air meetings. The place was swarming with members of the Security Branch of the South African Police, taking notes of speeches, but while a reception was being held in the Location Hall, the delegates were quietly removed to another place where, all night, the real business of the Conference was discussed without the members of the Security Branch being present. The enthusiasm of the people at that conference was an eye-opener to those who did not know what was happening in the ANC and how the people were being welded together in the common struggle for better rights in South Africa. Seeing this sense of unity and loyalty among the people, one newspaper correspondent called me aside and asked whether the leaders appreciated what a powerful instrument they were building up in the ANC and whether they would be able to use it with

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