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Profile: CHIEF LUTULI: *"He knows the woes of landless squatters"*

CHARLES HOOPER
author of 'BRIEF AUTHORITY' wrote this preface ot Chief Lutuli's book 'LET MY PEOPLE GO'

It is not easy to discern who at this moment might speak with full authority for South Africa's ten million Africans. Africans have always been denied the right to signify their choice by voting on the country's affairs. White rulers have throughout our history fostered all signs of hostility and jealousy between Africans, though they have never so blatantly and ruthlessly as at present divided in order to rule. Furthermore, no African organisation has successfully penetrated all sections of African Society. It is to this day just conceivable that there are, on white farms and in remote reserves, Africans who have never heard of Chief Lutuli — or, for that matter ,of Dr. Verwoerd.

Nevertheless, there has so far been at least one African Organisation — the now banned African National Congress — with some claim to being comprehensive: the best claim, at least. The Pan-African Congress, which for a while commanded world attention as the result of police shootings at Sharpeville, was, at the time of its suppression in 1960, of recent origin; and it appears to have had only a small following drawn exclusively from a few cities and towns. When it was forced — on the surface, anyway—into premature retirement, it had conducted no political campaign to a successful conclusion, and it had thrown up no leaders seasoned in the conflict. It had yet to prove itself.

The African National Congress, on the other hand, had for many years been the largest anti-apartheid, anti-supremacist organisation in the country. It could claim a following drawn from city, town and country, from peasants and professionals, from chiefs and labourers, from the mature and from the young. It could claim experience. It could claim to have achieved, latterly, effective liaison with groups other than African — with Indians, Europeans, and (on occasion) Coloured people — all of whom regarded it as the spearhead of resistance. It could not, unfortunately, for South Africa, claim to have fashioned the machinery necessary for running itself in a country so large, and in face of persistent Government and police interference, obstruction, and persecution.

Unchallenged at the head of the African National Congress, for the roughest and most heartbreaking ten years in South African political life hitherto, stood Albert John Lutuli. Placed there by the vote of his own Congress, and accepted by organisations of other races willing to co-operate, the ex-chief deposed by Dr. Verwoerd became head of something more than a mission reserve. He became, his stature and influence growing yearly, leader of the real opposition, embracing South Africans of all complexion. As far as there is, or ever has been, an embodiment both of the African people and of the multi-racial resistance to apartheid and supremacy, it is to be found in Chief Lutuli.

The impact which the Chief makes at first encounter is difficult to analyse. One is aware of an impact; but no quality, unless it be that of charming and generous warmth, stands out. His character, his temperament, his qualities and his stature reveal themselves discursively, and only as they unfold does one begin to grasp the striking wholeness of the man, his coherence and his integrity. A mind is at work; but never merely academically, never without imagination. Imagination is at work; but never without restraint and discipline, never engaged in fantasy, and never at the expense of truth. Restraint and discipline are there; but they issue neither in inflexibility nor in untoward austerity. No quality stands out by itself, each balances the others, and all go to the making of a man at whose centre is greatness of heart.

On one occasion Chief Lutuli and his wife visited us briefly — a small, purely domestic occasion — at a seaside cottage. The African tenants on that property and on adjacent lands, illiterate and pitiful people for the most part, got word that a chief was there, though few had ever seen one in their lives. They gathered outside and then asked permission to enter in order to pay their respects. Chief Lutuli received them. Until then we had known the leader of the resistance. Now we watched a man who knew the woes of landless squatters. He discovered each of them as an individual; he enquired after children and absent relations; and he gave them, quite unconsciously, a glimpse of dignity and composure, of some glory departed. They went away comforted: some with tears in their eyes, but nevertheless comforted.

It was not the occasion. It was the stature of the man they had met. Somehow, within his person, Chief Lutuli reconciles a multitude of men — peasant, townsman and squatter, scholar and student, chief and subject, grey-beard and angry young man, men of the new Africa and men of the old.

A year after this minor incident one of the squatters whom the Chief had met was evicted by white landowners. He had been born on the property, but white conquest had turned all Africans there into squatters. His eviction, in the context of South African laws, at once made it illegal for this man and his family to be anywhere: squatting elsewhere was unlawful, and neither reserve nor city would have him. Even out on the road, where he found himself with his wife, children, pots and pans, he was liable to arrest for vagrancy. There was no legal answer, nowhere to go.

When we told the Chief this story he remembered the man, even remembered that he was an epileptic. He must have heard many similar hard-luck stories — the country abounds in them; yet he flinched as he listened; and his first reaction was not to the intolerable injustice of the "case", but to the plight of the man and his children. There was anger over the perverse cruelty of Nationalist laws and over the white landowners' failure to envisage the consequences of their actions in human terms; but anger came after compassion. Nor was the compassion mere sentiment: the Chief immediately set about trying to do something to help the homeless epileptic whom he had met only once, a year earlier.

Compassion is a part of Chief Lutuli's habitual way of looking at people. Its obverse is a large sense of comedy, an unquenchable delight in people. Yet, for all the ease of his rich, joyous laughter, and his quick pity, there is a detachment about people, too: not from them, but about them, whether friend or foe. It is as though something in him holds aloof, subject neither to the sudden partisanships of the emotions, nor to bitterness and resentment. About the policy, the act of cruelty, or the vicious law, he is ruthless and can be formidably angry; but he refuses to assault the personalities of the men behind these things.

It may be that it is this detachment, coupled with his gifts of imagination, which accounts for Chief Lutuli's extraordinary power of entering the minds and emotions of other people. He is capable of understanding the Afrikaner dilemma with far greater clarity than most of their English-speaking fellow-whites; and the quaint, backward-looking Englishry of Natal is more explicit to Lutuli than it is to Dr. Verwoerd. His imagination falters only when the mental state of his opponents enters the world of shadows: "I can understand and disagree with the man who says, 'I want five farms'. But I cannot grasp what is in his mind when he says, 'I would rather murder or be shot than surrender one of them'."

Yet Chief Lutuli's perception of the maladies which all South Africans of various race does not deflect him. For instance, the fact that white South Africans see in the idea of universal adult suffrage a terrifying threat evokes in him the desire to reassure them; but he continues, with a kind of serene assurance, to demand universal adult suffrage regardless of race.

The Chief's assurance has about it something paradoxical. It is far removed from the ruthless political bigotry of his more notable opponents and their adherents. It is the assurance of a man who, now in his sixties, is still exploring, who is still open to humane and reasoned argument, and who thinks it no indignity to learn from the shrewd wisdom of peasants and the insight of the young. He will come in and say, "There, now! A worker I met at the bus-stop has just told me something I never knew about soil erosion!" Or, "Think twice, Ismail. Don't dismiss that white fellow's argument too lightly, just because he was angry." I think the paradox is this: the assurance is so deeply grounded in intellectual humility that it is not possible to distinguish one from the other. Neither quality would be there but for the other. Assurance without arrogance, and the humility of a man who cannot be humiliated: this is a rare combination. "Nationalist laws seek to degrade us. We do not consent. They degrade the men who frame them. They injure us — that is something different."

Assurance and humility stand the Chief and his country in good stead, as do other of his qualities. Resilience, youthfulness of spirit, undauntable courage, wisdom, tolerance, charity, a zest for living, patience. If there is one quality, usually associated with leadership, which he lacks, it is ambition. There is behind him no struggle for power, and within him no determination to rule in person.

But above all, perhaps, Chief Lutuli is a great patriot, the greatest in a country not altogether devoid of true patriotism. Few whites can even glimpse this. To white South Africa (with exceptions — eminent names such as Jan Hofmeyr, Alan Paton and Margaret Ballinger come easily to mind, but there are others) patriotism has come to mean allegiance to a white group waited on by black helots. When Lutuli speaks, one is aware of his profound concern for South Africans, invariably men of all races, of his appreciation of the teeming cities, the farms, the crowded reserves and the look of the land, and of his love for Mother Africa and her troubled peoples.

The Verwoerd Government's reply to the challenge of this man has been to remove him. His third ban, a five-year one, is not half-run. He lives in a politically indifferent area, to which the ban confines him. Policemen knock on his door at odd hours: "Where is Luthuli?" They dog him wherever he goes, tap his telephone, open his mail, inspect his visitors.

The orator's voice is silenced. When he was banned in 1959, the Chief was part of the way through a tour of a nature quite unprecedented in South Africa. His modest account of it, towards the end of this book, gives little hint of its true significance. For the first time, whites were crowding to hear what an African leader had to say, a few Nationalists among them; and some were coming away with a new faith in South Africa, new doubts about the course followed for so long by successive white governments, and a maimed belief in the African bogey. Naturally, it became imperative for the Nationalists to silence him. He is, for the purposes, quite the most unfortunate embodiment of African aspirations which the African people could have found — an incorruptible, fearless and altogether unfrightening Crusader.

Today the mood is changing. The negotiations are over . Dr. Verwoerd proclaims the Afrikaner republic with the country on what the newspapers call a "war-footing". In one of their aims — whether conscious or not, there is no knowing — the Nationalists have succeeded. The sanest men are bound; and out of South Africa's complexity the ruling minority have wrought a situation in which black and white are at last lining up in tense opposition. Formerly the white determination was to ride the patient beast; now there is a mounting desire to fight him. Not all matadors survive.

For Africans the choice narrows down rapidly to servitude or death. That is what the "war-footing" proclaims to them. The army has been described by a Cabinet Minister as an instrument only secondarily designed to protect South Africa's frontiers; its primary function is "to shoot down the black masses."

In face of this sort of threat, and deprived of their leaders by one means and another, what will the African people do? For how long will they continue to be approachable? Chief Lutuli's influence, despite his banishment, is still strong: He still represents the African wish to bring about a newly-ordered South Africa peacefully, without bloodshed or unnecessary dislocation. The offer is still open.

But every week brings change. The African people are now confronted finally by the inflexible refusal of the Government to compromise — the outcome of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference demonstrated this as nothing else has. They are confronted by an impossible choice: voluntary subjection or enforced subjection. They are confronted by the flat, toneless denial of every single thing which Chief Lutuli demands in the name of his people.

If this situation is allowed to continue unabated — and it shows no sign of abating — how long will it be before the Union's African people are seeking a new embodiment of new wishes? How long before, out of the depths, they cry, "If the man of peace does not prevail, give us the men of blood"?