

## CONGRESS AND THE AFRICANISTS

WALTER SISULU

*Former Secretary-General of the African National Congress. Now banned from holding office and standing trial on a charge of High Treason.*

IN recent months much has been published in the South African press about the 'Africanists' and their attempt to capture the leadership of the African National Congress. The struggle reached a climax at the Transvaal Provincial Conference of the A.N.C., held under the auspices of the National Executive on the 1st and 2nd November, 1958. The Africanists attempted to "pack" the conference, but most of their supporters failed to qualify as delegates. They then tried to break up the conference by force, and, when this attempt was defeated, they withdrew, announcing that they were leaving Congress and intended forming a new organisation.

The whole affair has been much exaggerated in the newspapers, especially in the so-called 'Bantu' press. Newspapers tend to thrive on sensations, and some of them were obviously motivated by malice towards Congress and a desire to emphasise and add to its difficulties. In reality, the Africanists were never able to muster much support or gain much influence in the A.N.C. Their departure has greatly pleased the great majority of Congressmen, who regarded them as a noisy and disruptive clique, and who consider all the talk of a "major split" in Congress as absurd.

It is unlikely that the Africanists will make much progress or maintain much cohesion among themselves now that they have left Congress. They appear to have little or nothing in the way of a constructive policy or original programme to offer to the public. They have had a lot to say, it is true, but so far it has been exclusively destructive and critical of Congress leadership. All the leaders have shown themselves to be quarrelsome, unruly and ambitious; one doubts whether they will ever achieve much agreement on aims and leadership.

Yet it would be wrong for any student of politics in this country to ignore the significance of this development. Even though the Africanists have not evolved any definite programme and policy, the general trend of their ideas is manifest: it lies in a crude appeal to African racialism as a reply to White arrogance and oppression. The principal target of their attacks is the broad humanism of the African National Congress, which

claims equality but not domination for the African people, and regards South Africa as being big enough and rich enough to sustain all its people, of whatever origin, in friendship and peace.

This broad outlook of Congress finds its clearest expression in the opening sentence of the Freedom Charter, which boldly declares that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, Black and White". It is precisely this formulation which is most strongly attacked by the Africanists. In their letter of secession from the A.N.C., they declare that "the Kliptown Charter" is "in irreconcilable conflict" with the 1949 Congress "Programme of Action", "seeing that it (the Freedom Charter) claims that the land no longer belongs to the African people but is auctioned for sale to all who belong to this country". Leaving aside the inflated polemical language of this statement (characteristic of all "Africanist" writings), the intention is clear: it is a denial that any section of the population other than the descendants of indigenous Africans have any rights in the country whatsoever.

There are several other issues used by the Africanists in their attacks on A.N.C. leadership and policy. They bitterly denounce the Congress Alliance—the working partnership which has developed between the A.N.C. and the Indian Congress, the (White) Congress of Democrats, the Coloured People's Organisation and the Congress of Trade Unions. They say that the alliance "waters down African nationalism", and charge that it is dominated by the Whites of C.O.D. and the Indians of the S.A.I.C. They say that the Whites in the alliance are not sincere and cannot be relied upon in the struggle to end White supremacy. They say that the A.N.C. leadership is Communistic and out of step with the nationalist movement in the rest of the continent, which has no alliance with other racial groups. They say that the Congress leadership has abandoned traditional Congress policy "as it was formulated in 1912", and that they, the Africanists, are "launching out as custodians" of that policy (Letter of Secession, November, 1958).

In the first place, it should be stated as emphatically as possible that the Africanists' principal charge—that Congress has departed from its traditional purpose and policy—is untrue and unfounded.

The constituent Conference of 1912, at which the African National Congress was established, set forth the following objectives:—

- (1) To unite all the various tribes in South Africa;
- (2) To educate public opinion on the aspirations of the black man of South Africa;
- (3) To advocate on behalf of the African masses equal rights and justice;
- (4) To be the mouthpiece of the African people and their chiefs;
- (5) To represent the people in government and municipal affairs;
- (6) To represent them in the Union Parliament, and generally, to do all such things as are necessary for the progress and welfare of the African people.

Within the framework of these broad general objectives, Congress has continued steadily, up to the present day. It has consistently demanded "equal rights and justice". It has never advocated the replacement of exclusive rights for Whites, as established by the Union's Constitution, following the precedent of the two Boer Republics, with exclusive rights for Africans as now proposed by the "Africanists". In putting forward this conception, it is they who are departing from the original objectives and purposes of the founders of Congress; it is the present Congress leaders who are the true continuers and custodians of those purposes and traditions.

An important policy statement, known as the "Bill of Rights", was drawn up in 1943 by a committee composed of leading Africans from various parts of the Union. It was issued by the A.N.C. at the time, in a pamphlet entitled "African Claims", as a formal statement of Congress policy. It declared, *inter alia*:

"We, the African people in the Union of South Africa, urgently demand the granting of full citizenship in South Africa. We demand abolition of discrimination based on race, and the extension to all adults regardless of race of the right to vote and be elected to Parliament, Provincial Councils and other representative institutions. We demand the right to an equal share in all the material resources of the country. We demand a fair redistribution of the land as a prerequisite for a just settlement of the land problem."

Finally, I may cite the Programme of Action of 1949, which the Africanists continually declare to be inconsistent with the Freedom Charter, and which they claim as "their own" programme. "In 1949 we got the African people to accept the nation-building programme of that year," declares the Afri-

canists' letter of resignation of last November. Actually the 1949 Programme of Action was a regular Congress document, adopted at a national conference on the initiative of the Congress leadership and issued over the signature of the present writer. Only one or two of the Africanists had any hand in it.

The 1949 "Programme" was really a plan of work, dealing mainly with proposed methods of struggle, such as strikes, civil disobedience and boycotts, but it opened with a short political preamble. This preamble consists primarily of an endorsement of the "Bill of Rights," cited above, and emphasised the demands for the immediate abolition of all discriminatory laws and the participation of Africans in all Councils of State.

The Freedom Charter of 1955 is in a direct line of succession to the various documents cited above, and to the many other statements of Congress policy and principle down the years. Beginning with the statement that South Africa belongs to the people who live in it, but that our people have been robbed of their birthright to land, peace and liberty by an unjust form of government, it goes on to claim that every man and woman shall have the right to vote and to stand as a candidate for election to all bodies which make laws, and that the rights of all people shall be the same, regardless of race, colour or sex. The Charter goes on to demand equality in every sphere of life, in its ten famous chapters, which are identical in spirit and closely parallel in content to the eleven points of the "Bill of Rights", as published in "African Claims", and specifically endorsed in the 1949 "Programme of Action".

The above, of course, is no more than a brief sketch of the evolution of Congress policy down the years. Nevertheless it is sufficient to demonstrate amply that, while A.N.C. policy has naturally evolved down the years, in changing circumstances at home and abroad, becoming more detailed and clearer in formulation, it has retained throughout a fundamental continuity and consistency which is striking and remarkable. Tested against the facts, the Africanists' accusation that Congress has departed from its traditional programme cannot be sustained.

Nor is it true that the African National Congress has ever pursued a line of exclusive "Black chauvinism" and hostility to other racial groups, as now advocated by the Africanists. From its earliest days, Congress has rejected the whole ideology of "master races" and "servant races" as expressed in the

Constitution and structure of the Union. It has repudiated the idea of "driving the White man into the sea" as futile and reactionary, and accepted the fact that the various racial groups in South Africa have come to stay. It has consistently sought the co-operation of other political groups and other races, of religious, liberal and leftist groups and organisations, in its struggle for freedom and equality. Indeed there was a time when the Congress leadership, contrasting the relatively enlightened policy of the "liberal Cape" with the blatant "inequality in Church and State" of the northern republics, placed too heavy a reliance upon the goodwill of White leaders, and tended to react to such early manifestations of 'apartheid' as the 1913 Land Act by sending futile deputations and appeals to Whitehall.

In the disillusioning years that followed, the African people and Congress have learned to put their trust not in aid from others, but in their own strength and organisation. Nevertheless Congress has at all times welcomed and taken the initiative in achieving co-operation with other organisations representing different population-groups, provided always that such co-operation was on a basis of equality and disinterested adherence to mutual aims. It is this consistent Congress policy of unity and anti-racialism which has borne fruit in the present-day Congress alliance, which is continually broadening its scope and winning the support and allegiance of increasing numbers of South Africans, and which has won the A.N.C. world-wide admiration and respect. This policy enjoys the support of the overwhelming majority of the Congress membership, who recognise it as being in the best traditions of the organisation. Every attempt by the Africanists to reverse the policy of alliance and replace it with one of narrow sectionalism and exclusiveness has been crushingly rejected by the membership in provincial and national conferences.

Thus, the co-called "African nationalism" of the Africanists turns out to be a mere inverted racialism, foreign to the spirit and traditions of the African people, and more in line with the Afrikaner Nationalist Party than with the progressive liberationist nationalism of Congress. This type of racial exclusiveness has been condemned the world over, and not least by the progressive African national movements of this continent. The recent All-African Peoples' Conference at Accra roundly condemned, in a formal resolution,

"the practice of racial discrimination and segregation in all its

aspects, all over the world.”

The fact that, due to differences of historical development and present conditions, African liberationist movements in many other parts of the continent have not found allies in their struggle among other population groups, unreservedly accepting equality, self-government, independence and democracy as their programme, is unfortunately misunderstood or distorted by the Africanists to imply that they oppose such alliances on principle. Nothing could be further from the truth. Africa and its peoples have suffered too much in the past from racialism and the “master race” ideology to adopt any such dangerous doctrines. Nothing has brought greater credit to the A.N.C. in the eyes of Africa and the world than its steadfast refusal to respond to the vicious persecution of the Nationalists and their predecessors in the Union Government by a blind and irrational “anti-Whiteism”. It has shown the African people to be larger-minded than, and morally superior to, their oppressors; it strikingly refutes the ridiculous claims of “White South Africa” about alleged African “immaturity” and “unreadiness for self-government.”

The isolation and repudiation of the Africanists became more complete with their open sabotage of the Congress cause after the National Workers’ Conference of March, 1958. The A.N.C. and the other Congresses had decided to demonstrate during election week against the undemocratic travesty of a “General Election” which debarred the majority from any participation. All the forces of oppression were mobilised against the proposed demonstration. The Prime Minister threatened retaliation “with the full might of the State”. The United Party called upon the Government to take firm action against Congress. The police force, the Native Affairs Department, and the army were called into action against the proposed general strike. Newspapers, ranging from the Nationalist and United Party dailies down to the so-called ‘Bantu’ press, preached continually and vociferously against Congress. Employers of labour and Verwoerd’s “loyal chiefs” added their threats and warnings.

When the Africanist leaders Madzunya and Leballo joined in this all-out campaign against the people, they were hailed in the daily papers as “the most responsible and powerful Native leaders”. Overnight they had become heroes to the upholders of White supremacy. And overnight they forfeited whatever

small respect or confidence they might still have enjoyed within the ranks of Congress.

Congress is a broad and tolerant organisation, firmly wedded to democratic principle and refusing to impose any single ideology upon its members. But, at the same time, the A.N.C. is not merely a debating society, and cannot tolerate open sabotage of its struggle. The National Executive promptly expelled Madzunya and Leballo for their treacherous activities, and it is notable that this action was warmly applauded by branches throughout the country. It was the end of the Africanists' noisy career in Congress. True, ignoring his expulsion, Mr. Madzunya announced himself as a "candidate" for the position of President of the Transvaal at the November conference in Orlando. And true to form, his clique, attended by a number of armed supporters, came to Orlando hoping to repeat its tactic of smashing the conference. But this time the Congress membership was ready for him, and in no mood to tolerate any further mischief. When they saw they were outnumbered, the Africanists suddenly withdrew, and, as we have seen, announced their "secession". It was a damp squib.

For a few days some newspapers tried to build up the "major split" in Congress as a sensation. It soon became apparent, however, that the departure of this faction had strengthened the organisation, not weakened it, and that they commanded no support inside or outside Congress. The "sensation" petered out. The national conference of Congress in December proved to be a remarkable demonstration of the confidence of the people in the present leadership, the Freedom Charter, and the Congress alliance.

For however much free publicity the Africanists may receive in the anti-Congress press, they are not likely to succeed in building any stable organisation or win much support for it, still less offering any serious challenge to the leadership of the people by the African National Congress. Many of them are not really serious; they handle "politics" like professional browsers, as though the South African struggle will be resolved in a study. They use Africanism as a sort of escape from the discipline, the hard slogging day-to-day work, and the possible personal dangers which face the ordinary Congress member. Pride or conscience will not allow them to withdraw from politics altogether, so they think the best thing is to play safe, become sofa critics of Congress, and use revolutionary language occasionally at Con-

ference, safe in the knowledge that the Government will not take any action against them.

Yet, these truths should not blind us to the fact that there are men and women amongst them who genuinely believe that the salvation of our people lies in a fanatical African racialism and denunciation of everything that is not African. And such a policy is not without its potential mass-appeal.

It would be unrealistic to pretend that a policy of extreme nationalism must, in the nature of things, always be unpopular. The people are quick to detect the insincerity of the mere demagogue, and they have confidence in the courage and wisdom of their tried and trusted leaders. But in a country like South Africa, where the Whites dominate everything, and where ruthless laws are ruthlessly administered and enforced, the natural tendency is one of growing hostility towards Europeans. In fact most Africans come into political activity because of their indignation against Whites, and it is only through their education in Congress and their experience of the genuine comradeship in the struggle of such organisations as the Congress of Democrats that they rise to the broad, non-racial humanism of our Congress movement.

With a State policy of increasingly barbaric repression of the African people; with the deliberate destruction of every form of normal human contact between people from different population-groups; and with the systematic banning and isolation of the convinced and fervent anti-racialists among the Africans from political activity, there is no knowing what the future will hold.

The Africanists have thus far failed, but their mere appearance is an urgent warning to all democratic South Africans. The Africans have set a wonderful example of political wisdom and maturity to the rest of the country, but they are not perfect, any more than any other community of men and women sorely beset. In certain circumstances, an emotional mass-appeal to destructive and exclusive nationalism can be a dynamic and irresistible force in history. We have seen in our own country how—decade after decade—the Afrikaner people have followed yet more extreme and reactionary leaders. It would be foolish to imagine that a wave of Black chauvinism, provoked by the savagery of the Nationalist Party (and perhaps secretly encouraged and financed by it too), may not some day sweep through our country. And if it does, the agony will know no colour-bar at all.