

UCT WOLPE

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I call my book "The Dream Deferred" after a poem by Langston Hughes, that Mbeki loves, and that he frequently cited in the mid 1990s to make the point about a crisis of expectation. Worth listening to again, fifteen years later, in a second period of transition:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

We are going through a period in several ways not unlike 1994: immanent change of government, recession, heightened expectations from some, fear and anxiety in others. And in so much of the mood of the moment I hear responses to the dream deferred: I see it in the depression – the bleakness—the literal darkness that so many people experience; I saw it, at Polokwane, in the manic, almost millenarian jubilation at Thabo Mbeki's defeat. And I see it now, so much, in the anger directed at Mbeki; an explosion of anger that is as palpable in lecture theatres such as this as it was at Polokwane: a sense of betrayal, of having been let down or even deceived.

Certainly, this anger is in many cases legitimate and even justified – and I'd be lying if I said I didn't share some of it myself. But when I hear people say – as a prominent leader of the Jewish community said to me recently—that Mbeki is the worst president we've ever had and is going to go down in history as a dismal failure—I can't help but think of Langston Hughes lines:

*From river to river
Uptown to down
There's liable to be confusion
When a dream gets kicked around.*

Thabo Mbeki acknowledged this confusion in his SOTN speech, and as we enter our second transition, I do think it's appropriate to ask where the Dream is for all of us; where it is for Jacob Zuma and the new ANC leadership; and –of course, given my particular focus and the focus of this evening – where it is for Thabo Mbeki.

I joked when I brought my book out, just before Polokwane, that my work was not over – I'd have to write a sequel or an epitaph. What I'm realising now, as I try to make sense of what's going on, is that it's neither; rather it's the Fifth act of a Shakespearean Drama, or the final act --reversal of a Greek Tragedy, in which a brilliant, committed and courageous man is felled by his inability to conquer his own fatal flaws....

Thinking this way has led me back to one of Mbeki's own favourite plays, Coriolanus – Shakespeare's intense, dark political thriller. I write about C in my book, and about a letter I found written by TM in which he praised Coriolanus – usually seen as a vainglorious protofascist, as the very model for a modern revolutionary: a bit like Che Guevara, full of "truthfulness, courage, self-sacrifice, absence of self-seeking, brotherliness, heroism, optimism".

Now one's got to be very careful with letters. Myguru Janet Malcolm calls them "fossils of feeling" – and that's just right: They might give you a direct artery into how someone is feeling at a particular time, but they set that feeling in amber, and so what I get, when I find when I read the letter now is a fossilized emotion; something that was true when the writer wrote it, at 2 am on the 9 June 1969, but that might not be true when he wakes up a few hours later, let alone three decades later! This is the thrill, and the danger, of letters I have taken something Mbeki wrote and made it a leitmotif for his presidency!

I once asked Mbeki what attracted him so much to Coriolanus, and he told me that he was drawn to the Roman general's uncompromising truth to himself; his adamant refusal to be anything other than what he was. He comes back to Rome after a great victory, and is urged to take on the Consulship of Rome. But he will not play the populist. He will not bend to the will of the people, and tell them what they want to hear. And although he has dedicated his life to the service of the Roman people, he is somewhat contemptuous of them: he sees them as a rabble, who need to be shown the way. When Volumnia, his ambitious mother, asks him to soften his line so as to gain the consulship, he spits back – "I will not do it... Would you have me false to my nature? I play the man I am!"

That, Mbeki told me, was what he kept from Coriolanus all these years later; it's what he says is at the core of his own refusal to play to the gallery. On the one hand – what an extraordinary quality in a leader. But on the other, surely any leader, particularly in a democracy, needs to be able to "play the man I am" while also "giving the people what they want." Mbeki, a subtle reader, must have surely seen that Coriolanus' fatal flaw was his inability to find a way of casting an image of himself that people wanted while remaining true to his principles.....

And yet, watching that three hour long dry-as-bones shopping list of achievements that seemed impervious to the rage and turmoil around him – I could not help but think of Coriolanus. Certainly, he was laying down, for the record, his achievements and saying to Zuma: this is what *you* are going to have to measure yourself against. Certainly, too, he was talking to his legacy rather than to the people in front of him. And he was also talking to history: ever since he wrote OR Tambo's Political Report in 1985, Mbeki has written them – and they have always been like this. It's the tradition.

But it was also a campaign speech of some kind. It had to have been – for he was standing for election. He was saying: If you want a man who can sing, and dance; a man with appetites who lives beyond his means and therefore falls prey to shysters like Schabir Shaik, but who makes you feel good, then that isn't me! This is me. And if you don't like it, then to hell with you: "I play the man I am."

It was a breathtaking spectacle: watching a man telling the very people whose vote he was canvassing that they they were, in effect, a rabble. That they were parvenus with no understanding of the ANC and its traditions. Is it any wonder he lost?

The parallels between Mbeki and Coriolanus are compelling. The Roman General, is deeply respected and deeply unpopular at the same time. When it is suggested that he placate the people about the price of corn, he responds, sharply and famously, "Hang 'em!" He understands the economics, as they don't – and so he knows that they need a macroeconomic programme, let's call it GEAR- that might leave them hungry in the short term!

When, later, he speaks out against a more participatory democracy, he is banished from Rome by the Tribunes, and responds by calling them a "common cry of curs" and telling them, "I banish you! *And here remain with your uncertainty.* There is a world elsewhere...." "

The absence of Thabo Mbeki from public life for weeks after Polokwane, particularly around the electricity crisis, had hints of Coriolanus saying “I banish *you!*” to the people who have banished him. His “world elsewhere”, perhaps, is the international world of diplomacy – the AU, Zimbabwe—where he finds solace, and where he will, I am sure, find refuge once his term is up. Meanwhile, the rest of us --as Mbeki acknowledged, finally, in his State of the Nation speech last week—here remain with our uncertainty.

In the end, Coriolanus goes to war against his own people in vengeance for their having exiled him from Rome. Conventionally, this is seen as hubris. But Mbeki sees it as heroism; true revolutionary activity. Coriolanus was “the scourge of the rabble, the unthinking mob, with its cowardice, its lying, its ordinary-people-ness.” Rome had to be purged of his rot, and Coriolanus would destroy the city and kill his own family in the process if he had to.

How, then, does Shakespeare’s Coriolanus help us to understand the tragedy of Thabo Mbeki at Polokwane?

We have to question why Mbeki stood for a third term in the first place; why he believed he was indispensable to the good governance of South Africa, and why he believed he was the only man who could stop Jacob Zuma. Coriolanus gives us an answer: if you see the people – and even their representatives- as a rabble, how could you possibly believe that one of them could succeed you?

Coriolanus's silver-tongued campaigner Menenius – far more eloquent I might add, than Essop Pahad or Mosioua Lekota— appeals to the people to accept Coriolanus' uncompromising nature as a sign of his nobility. But it's an argument bound to fail –as much in Shakespeare's democratic Rome as in 21st Century South Africa. It is precisely Coriolanus' nobility –his disconnection from the people—which has made him so unpopular in the first place. And it is precisely his adversaries' ability to project themselves as being in touch with the people that makes them so attractive, as a counter to this nobility. Zuma's ticket was that he was not an erudite nobleman, but rather the uneducated “herdboy from Inkandla”. He became a representative of the masses who felt they, too, had been banished from the banquet of victory.

Mbeki and his supporters characterised the Zuma crowd as “howlers”, as “hooligans”, as an “unruly mob”. The way this mob was behaving, it was said over and over again, was “against the tradition of the ANC”. Mbeki's tragedy was that he was unable to see that these traditions, honed in the ANC-in-exile, no longer applied in free, democratic South Africa. Zuma's victory was based on his ability to have his ears to the ground, and thus to adapt, and to understand contemporary South African politics, and to project himself as responsive, accountable, a man of the people. (Even if this is just spin)

Why couldn't Mbeki see it, if Zuma could? The answer lies in a word Mbeki gave me himself to describe his history: “disconnect”. He used the word to describe the way he grew up, outside of a community and without family, and then for three decades in exile, and he spoke to me, very movingly, about how his African Renaissance was –at least in part—a personal project of reconnection. He made a virtue of his disconnection – it gave him perspective, in a way that very rooted people might not have, and it enabled him, too, to be able to form a bridge, as no statesman ever had before, between Africa and the rest of the world. But it

served him very badly in Polokwane – all the more so, when he tried, belatedly and unconvincingly, to claim some kind of homeboy status in the Eastern Cape.

One saw this disconnect most clearly in the way he thought he was going to win, when all evidence proved that he wouldn't

- In the way he rather woundedly said, "I'm not aloof!" after the conference. Someone who was truly not aloof would say, "I don't think I'm aloof, but since you all think I am, what should I do to change?"
- In the way he played his speech, insisting on "playing the man I am", and refusing to bow to the wishes and the needs of his constituents

Coriolanus, too, suffers from this disconnect. And there are so many similarities between Mbeki and Coriolanus it's uncanny. Both were raised in struggle and thus had childhoods bereft of sentiment and nurture; both were raised, too, to lead their people, formed and deformed by the overwhelming ambitions of their elders. Both fly solo. Both understand the bigger world, and could thus be extraordinarily effective diplomats. But both – because they spent their lives fighting wars in different ways—found themselves uprooted, somewhat homeless.

Let's come back to why Mbeki might have loved Coriolanus so much, as a young man, and look at another possible fatal flaw that Shakespeare posits for his hero. This is one of Shakespeare's very last plays, and it is one of his most ambiguous; one of his most subtle. And to show you this, I need to tell you what happens to Coriolanus after he is banished from Rome. He finds common cause with his former enemies and leads them back to Rome with the intention of burning his home city – and the mindless rabble with it—to the ground. But then, at the city's gates, he is confronted with his family, his mother, his wife, and his infant child. He succumbs to their pleas, and chooses not to destroy the city from which he has been exiled. This infuriates his new allies, who kill him.

Shakespeare thus allows an interpretation –and I am certain Mbeki loved the play at least in part because he shared this interpretation—that Coridanus’s fatal flaw is not so much his excessive pride as his vulnerability to his mother’s arguments; a weakness borne of placing ties of blood before the politics of principle.

My book tracks the way Mbeki sublimates the personal and the emotional to the political. Like any good Marxist revolutionary, he is almost contemptuous of blood; of sentiment, of affect. These are things that distract you from revolutionary action. In many ways, this ideology was a lifesaving strategy for Mbeki, given his forced separation from his family. But it is also the root of his disconnection, and he –and thus we— continue to grapple with it today. The effects of this, of course, have had to deliver the ANC into the hands of someone who – whatever else his faults and weaknesses—is perceived to be able to make the connection.

The last line in the tragedy of Coriolanus is given to the man who murders him, Aufidius, the head of the Volscians, who says, “My rage is gone, And I am struck with sorrow,” and who vows that his victim “shall have a noble memory”. Reading Coridanus now, in these difficult times, has helped me temper some of my own anger at Mbeki, not only with sorrow, but also with a deeper understanding of the complexity of politics, and society. One of the triumphs of Coriolanus is that it shows Rome –the world—as a compromised, grubby place, a place of relativism, where nobody’s reputation is unsullied; where people are both virtuous and malevolent, both noble and flawed, and the world of politics – like transition, like a new democracy—is confusing, confounding, rocky, and – in the case of Ancient Rome at least –very bloody too.

Politically, at least, our blood remains –touch wood—merely symbolic. What we witnessed at Polokwane was salutary in many ways; democracy in action. But, symbolically, it was a regicide. There was something both brutal and exhilarating about it, just as there is to the murder of Coriolanus at the end of Shakespeare's play. But if there was a regicide –the murder of a king—rather than merely the passing of a baton— this was because Mbeki was perceived as having behaved like a king, and thus deserving of his fate. But its also because the ANC itself made him into a king – and therefore had to depose him if it wished to move on.

I write, in my book, about our need for our leaders to play a redemptive role; to be living saints; to save their people – and how I think this has hobbled many African leaders, Mbeki included. It's a totally unrealistic expectation, even if it is borne, understandably, from deep longing and dire material need. As I write in my book, "the mandate with which Thabo Mbeki came to power was not simply to raise taxes or lower them; to improve the national Health Service or balance the budget: his mandate was nothing less than the salvation of his people." Against such an impossible mandate, Is it any wonder he has been deemed to have failed – both by those at Polokwane, and those sitting in this room tonight?

I guess what I want to leave you with tonight is something I've written about before – the boom-bust, depressive nature of the SA political psyche. Either we're Mandela's rainbow children of god, the world's favourite fairy tale, or we're a third-world basket case, devoid of power and riddled with crime. Either Mbeki's a revolutionary hero, or a vainglorious protofascist. Either Zuma is a man of the people who knows how to make the masses feel part of this new society, or he's a corrupt, cynical demagogue willing to do anything – including wrecking the country—to stay out of jail. Either these are the best of times or the worst of times, a time of wisdom or a time of folly.

Of course they are neither. I think the truth about leadership and about society is – as Coriolanus shows us – far more complicated. And I think it's been hugely important for South Africa's maturation to realise that all leaders are flawed and weak – and ultimately dispensable. If Polokwane has done one thing, at last, it has put to bed that beguiling myth of the Mandela era: that South Africa is different to everywhere else, and that the A.N.C. is a cathedral of morality. No: it is a rowdy town hall of competing interests, driven by patronage and riven by personality; grubby with politics. It has, finally, ceased to be that liberation movement so admired by the world. It has become, instead, the ruling party of a young – but messy and unpredictable – democracy.

If we understand that, maybe we'll escape the boom bust cycle, and realise that each bump in the road is just part of a necessary journey we all have to take. There could be something truly liberating about this this realisation as we event this second transition.

“Gordimer and Reinhold were punctilious about mealtimes and good food; they prized an orderly household. Never a white wine glass for the red wine and so on. Frere Road’s efficient retainer, Tomas, was forever praised and Reinhold missed him terribly when in Zambia....” (193)