

Keynote address by the honourable Jeff Radebe,  
MP, Minister in The Presidency for Planning, Monitoring  
and Evaluation, on the occasion of the

# **PUBLIC LECTURE IN TRIBUTE TO O.R. TAMBO**

**TUYNHUY, PARLIAMENT OF SOUTH AFRICA, CAPE TOWN | 31 OCTOBER 2017**



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REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Life and legacy of  
**OR TAMBO.**  
**100 YEARS**



# 1. Introduction

It is an honour for me to be presented with the opportunity to pay homage to a great South African and distinguished leader of the national democratic revolution, Oliver Reginald (OR) Tambo.

Tambo remains the longest serving president of the African national Congress (ANC), the ruling party, having led the national democratic revolution for almost thirty years. We cannot tell the history of South Africa's liberation struggle without mentioning the prominent role played by Tambo as the towering leader of the struggle. He belongs to the pantheon of African liberation struggle heroes with great integrity, indisputable loyalty and commitment to the cause.

Many have rightfully argued that O.R. Tambo cannot die, for his legacy lives on.



**He left indelible footprints in our collective memory** and his vision as the leader of our liberation movement is entrenched in the contours of our democratic society. To reflect on the life of OR is to delve into the crevices of the history of our liberation struggle.

OR Tambo's leadership virtues remain unparalleled. Those who were fortunate to get to know and interact with Tambo would testify that he was a multidimensional being. I was fortunate to have interacted with him during his lifetime. I remember him as the epitome of incisive leadership, intellect and high moral standards.

## **He was the glue that held the national democratic revolution together during the most difficult times.**

Like Moses from the Biblical verses, who stood on mountain top and saw but never reached the Promised Land, Tambo passed away on the eve of freedom in South Africa. Even though he never reached the "promised land," as a great visionary, Tambo nurtured leaders and shaped a movement that would lead South Africa into the democratic dispensation.

Our current President, His Excellency Jacob Zuma, as well as his predecessor, President Thabo Mbeki, stand out as some of the shining examples of young leaders who were mentored by Comrade OR. Tambo ensured that he left a lasting legacy.



## 2. The Year of OR Tambo

Born Oliver Reginald Kaizana Tambo on 27 October 1917, he would have turned 100 years old this year, should he have continued to live. He passed away 24 years ago, in the early hours of 24 April 1993. President Zuma appropriately declared 2017 as The Year of O.R. Tambo.

This declaration helped to ensure that the life of this gallant leader is part of the public discourse. We recognise the role that OR Tambo played in the liberation struggle and the founding of our democratic society through the theme: “Life and Legacy of OR Tambo.” Subsequently, themes for national days such as Human Rights Day, Freedom Day, Youth Day and Heritage Day, were all aligned with the overall theme of celebrating the legacy of O.R. Tambo.

The President appointed a committee to preside over the preparations for the celebration of this milestone. It has been a great honour for me to lead this Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) comprised of leaders from the three tiers of government – from local, provincial and national. This structure made the coordination of this event much easier. It also created a platform for exchange of ideas so that we can have a yearlong commemorative programme befitting a man of OR’s stature.

We have seen government departments, state-owned enterprises, businesses, civil society and members of the public, paying tribute to this gallant leader of our people. I must take this opportunity to thank all the stakeholders that paid homage to OR during the course of the year.



**I am sure he is smiling down on us, pleased that South Africans of all walks of life embrace his ideals and celebrate his legacy.**

A number of eminent persons have spoken eloquently about this gallant leader of our people at various events, and I am truly privileged to close the OR Tambo Month with my own tribute. I must declare from the outset that the sentiments that have been expressed by various speakers during the course of the month are a true reflection of the OR I know.

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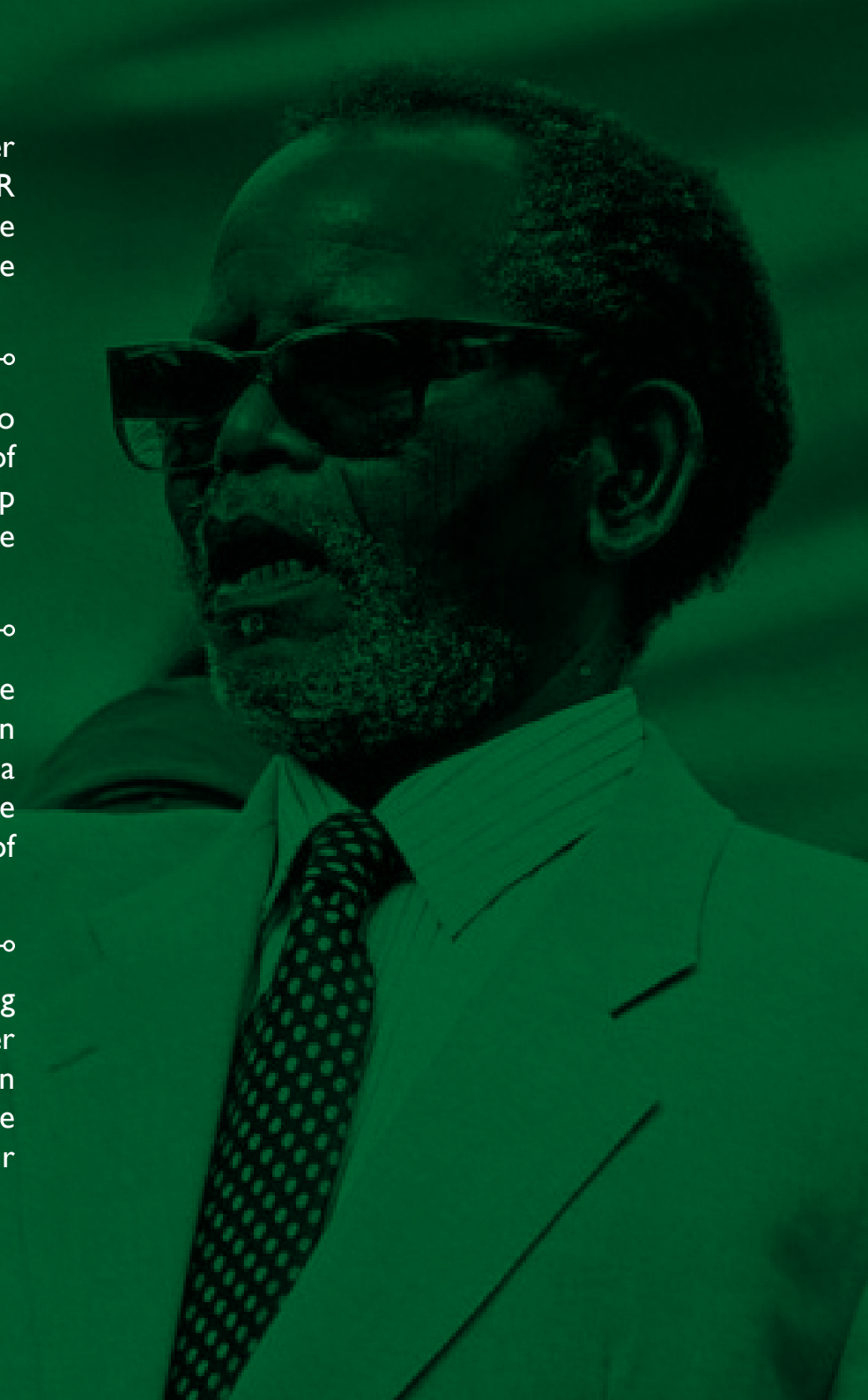
Indeed, I echo the sentiments expressed by previous speakers that OR Tambo was a great humanitarian and a remarkable leader to work with. To speak of OR Tambo is to speak of a towering intellectual with unparalleled leadership virtues. He remains the crucible from which we seek inspiration and a figure that we must strive to emulate.

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The OR Tambo I know as a versatile and multidimensional leader. Today, we celebrate Tambo a maths and science teacher, a lawyer, a devout Christian, an internationalist, a global leader, a unifier, a revolutionary, a music composer, a loving husband, a responsible father, to name but a few. In short, we celebrate a courageous leader who selflessly devoted his life in service of the people of South Africa. OR epitomised servitude.

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We celebrate Tambo's memory because he remains one of the most outstanding leaders that this country has ever produced. You do not need to be a member of the ANC in order to recognise and appreciate Tambo's selfless dedication to the service of the people of South Africa. We must celebrate excellence in leadership as a means of recognising the positive contribution that our citizens make in society.



### 3. A Trailblazer and Youth Activist

The global leader that we celebrate today is a product of a small rural village on Nkantolo, beyond the Engeli Mountains, in what was known as Pondoland in the Eastern Cape Province. Those who have read about the Pondo Revolt, which another stalwart and towering intellectual giant of our liberation struggle, Govan Mbeki, wrote extensively about, would understand that OR Tambo was born in the region of revolutionaries.

It is reported that he was named Kaizana as a tribute to Kaizer Wilhelm of Germany, who fought against the British during the First World War. This was his father's way of defying the British colonial powers. Even though he did not receive formal schooling, Tambo's father understood the value of education and was determined to ensure that his children were not deprived of the opportunity to learn. He gave his horse to his son so he could ride to school, which was about 16 kilometres away from their village.

After completing high school, Tambo studied at the historic University College of Fort Hare, where he met his long time companion, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. He initially wanted to study medicine, but there was lack of tertiary institutions that offered the course for black students. He completed a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics and physics.

It was at Fort Hare where his leadership skills became prominent. As the Secretary of the Students Representative Council (SRC), Tambo led a defiance against the university authorities, resulting in his expulsion from the University. He had difficulty in securing a job because of his expulsion from Fort Hare. He was finally offered a teaching position in his alma mater, St Peters Secondary School in Rosettenville, where he taught Maths and Science. He is renowned a one of the best teachers of these subjects at the time.



He qualified as an attorney in 1951, and together with Mandela they formed the Mandela and Tambo law firm. **They were some of the pioneering legal minds in the black community**, and their services were in great demand as they continued to fight for the destitute, the oppressed and the marginalised.

While their legal practice was burgeoning, Mandela and Tambo continued with their activism at the organisational level. Tambo was one of the founding members of the ANC Youth League alongside Anton Lembede, Mandela and Walter Sisulu, among others. He was appointed as the National Secretary of the ANC Youth League and served in the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC from the youthful age of thirty-one.

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As a young activist, Tambo was a trailblazer who played a prominent role in shaping the course of the South African struggle for liberation. Even as an elder, comrade OR was a staunch believer in youth development. He was the kind of leader who was concerned about continuity, and always ensured that he nurtured young talent to take over from his generation.

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One of his most memorable utterances was when he declared:

**THE CHILDREN OF ANY NATION  
ARE ITS FUTURE.**

A country, a movement, a person that does not value its youth and children does not deserve its future.

Comrade OR was equally passionate about the emancipation of women. In November 1983, he released a statement declaring 1984 as the year of women. The statement partly read:

**“We shall do this not merely to pay tribute to the embattled but struggling womenfolk of our country and to honour their historic achievements, such as the founding of the South African Women`s Federation on April 17, 1954. We have thus dedicated the coming year as confirmation of the resolve of the South African national liberation movement to see the women of our motherland play their rightful role in the forefront of the struggle for the destruction of the monstrous system of apartheid and the creation of a peaceful, democratic and non-racial South Africa.”**

He said one of the fundamental tasks that this process of national liberation confronts is the liberation of the women of our country from their triple oppression on the grounds of sex, class and colour. He stated that the struggle in South Africa constitute an important component in the universal offensive for a peaceful world whose human and material resources should serve to enhance life in all its parts, whether spiritual or material. He ensured that women did not remain on the periphery but occupied strategic positions in the movement.

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We celebrate Tambo today because of his endearing teachings, principles and values. He proved to be a teacher in the classroom, a teacher in the boardroom and a teacher in the battlefield. Under his stewardship, the national democratic revolution remained intact until he brought it back home after the unbanning of political parties in 1990.



## 4. An Internationalist and Champion of African Solidarity

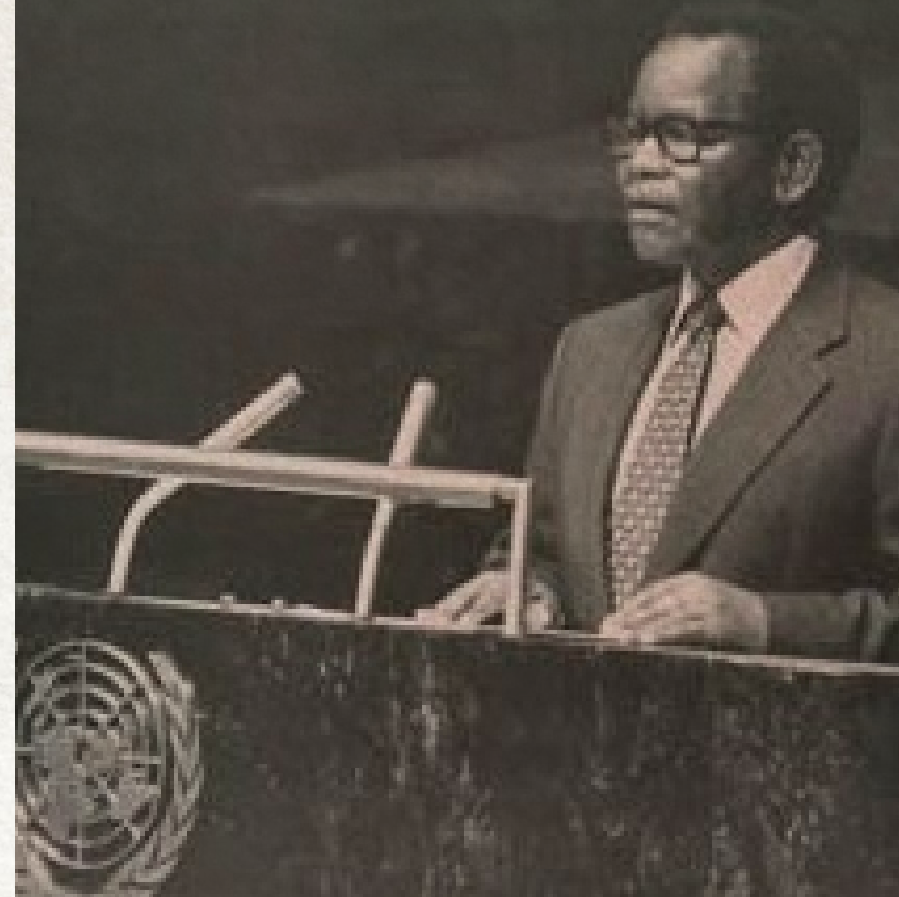
OR Tambo was an internationalist par excellence and a champion of African solidarity. He was sent to exile by the national leadership of the ANC after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. As the head of the ANC's diplomatic mission, his task in exile was loud and clear – to escalate the struggle to an international level.

Unity amongst Africans on the continent, in the diaspora and across the globe featured prominently in his core values. One of the principles that undergird Tambo's leadership was the unity of people of the world against oppression. It was in pursuit of unity of liberation movements that he wrote in the New Age in 1956:

*“Petty differences among the African people and their organisations where they exist must be submerged in the interests of a firm unity in the face of attack by the Nationalists.”*

In 1960, he was instrumental in establishing a South African United Front with the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the South West Africa National Union (SWANU).

Tambo traversed the continent and galvanised different African countries to be in solidarity not only with the ANC, but with the entire South African liberation movement inclusive of different political formations. Shortly after he left the country, he engaged with prominent African leaders such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Ntsu Mokhehle of Lesotho and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and who all affirmed their support for the national democratic revolution.



He raised funds for the movement and represented us at world forums such as the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations (UN). **Many countries recognised him as a diplomat and accorded him the status of a head of state.** Subsequent to his efforts, the ANC had Chief Representatives in several countries across the African continent.

He identified Moses Kotane, JB Marks and Duma Nokwe as trusted and capable cadres to assist him in building the movement in exile. Kotane was the General Secretary of the South African Communist Party (SACP), Treasurer General of the ANC and a key figure in the formation of progressive trade union movements in South Africa. Similarly, Marks had been the trade unionist, President of the African Mine Workers and also the President of the ANC in Transvaal. Nokwe was the Secretary-General of the ANC.

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This formidable team was not only strategic in waging a strong fight against the apartheid regime, but it also established a solid foundation for the tripartite alliance, which remained a resilient force for decades. For Tambo, a devout Christian who was on the verge of being ordained as an Anglican priest before he went to exile, to nominate staunch communists to work closely with him was a reflection of the visionary leader that he was. He understood that ideological differences cannot stand in the way of the revolution. The common enemy was the apartheid regime.

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In his international undertakings, Tambo proved to be a highly perceptive internationalist. He managed to mobilise different countries to be in solidarity not only with the ANC, but with the entire South African liberation movement inclusive of different political formations. He raised funds for the movement and represented us at world forums such as the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations (UN).

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Many countries recognised him as a diplomat and accorded him the status of a head of state. The ANC received substantial military assistance from socialist countries such as Cuba, the Soviet Union, as well as several African countries.

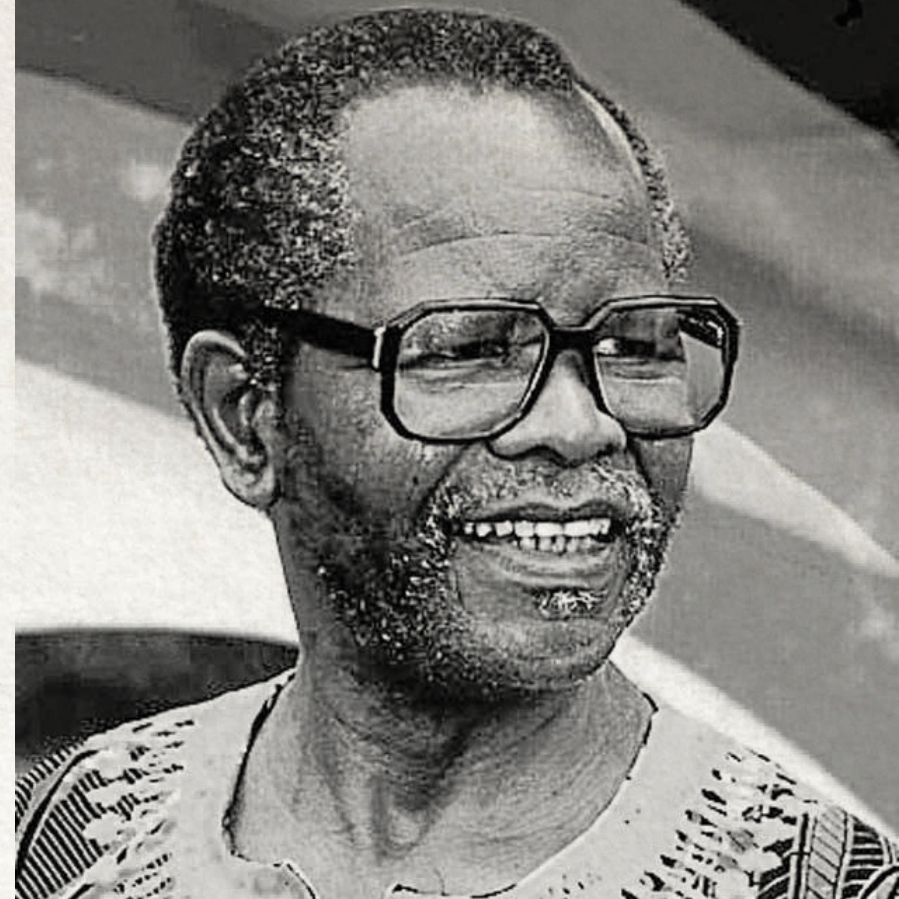


## 5. A Dynamic and Multidimensional Leader

Those who were fortunate to get to know and interact with Tambo would testify that he was a dynamic and multidimensional being. He had very diverse interests that were by no means contradictory with his core principles.

Any interaction with Tambo was an unforgettable experience. My first personal encounter with him is still etched in my memory as if it was only yesterday. It was in 1978 and I was working for Radio Freedom in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, when he visited the station. The ANC's Department of Information and Publicity fell under the jurisdiction of the Office of the President.

While we respected him for being such a colossal figure in the liberation movement, Tambo's humility and quiet wisdom gave us a sense of comfort around him. He proved to be a compassionate human being and a great listener who valued diverse opinions. He was very patient with us as young cadres and shared incisive ideas about strategies and tactics to send ANC messages home and across the world.



**Tambo was a meticulous leader who approached everything with vigilance.** I can distinctly remember an incident where one senior ANC leader painstakingly researched, wrote and rewrote a speech for the President, and when he thought it was perfect, he handed over to him. Upon receiving the speech, OR did his own editing and butchered the speech to such an extent that the fellow comrade could not recognise his own writing in it.

# He was also a hands-on revolutionary leader who was never scared to get his hands dirty.

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During the Wankie campaign, Tambo alongside James Chikerema, the Vice-President of the Zimbabwean African People's Union (ZAPU), was in the trenches and personally saw off the Luthuli detachment as they crossed the Zambezi River to wage one of the fiercest attacks against the South African Defence Force and its allies.

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This detachment, comprised of UMKhonto weSizwe (MK) and Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) soldiers, courageously fought the South African forces in one of the epic military confrontations of our liberation struggle.

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## 6. The Visionary of a Free and Democratic South Africa

As a visionary leader, Tambo was able to anticipate the kind of challenges that we would face as a governing party as opposed to liberation movement. He knew that the mere jettisoning of apartheid was not going to transform ours into a utopian society.

He wanted us to be ready for the transition and confront the challenges of governance. He sounded the alarm bells to the ANC cadres in Angola as far back as 1977: “Comrades, you might think it is very difficult to wage a liberation struggle. Wait until you are in power. By then, you will realise that it is actually more difficult to keep the power than to wage a liberation war.”

Many of us had never been in government before 1994, but we managed to have a relatively smooth transition because Comrade OR prepared us for the new dispensation. He ensured that ANC cadres, many of whom just wanted to be militants who would fight the apartheid regime in the battlefield, received education as the basis for future development of the country. His vision was to ensure that the ANC ranks were filled with professionals and experts in a variety of fields. I am one of the beneficiaries of OR Tambo’s vision in this regard.



It is not an exaggeration to say our constitution today has got the DNA of Comrade OR all over it. One of the landmarks in our road to freedom was in 1987, when he appointed a commission of ANC legal minds to draw up a constitution to reflect the kind of a country that the ANC and the people of South Africa wanted. **To some this might have seemed like a pipe dream, but to OR it was an imminent reality.**

In 1988, he appointed a team to draw up the ANC's position and approach to the negotiations. He epitomised consultative leadership, as he drew views from both the ANC in exile as well as from the Mass Democratic Movement inside South Africa. Following extensive discussions with the leaders of the frontline states leaders, Tambo worked closely with the team that drafted the Harare Declaration. The Declaration stated that: *“We believe that a conjuncture of circumstances exist which, if there is a demonstrable readiness on the Pretoria regime to engage in negotiations genuinely and seriously, could create the possibility to end apartheid through negotiations”*.

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The Harare Declaration paved the way for negotiations that culminated with the first democratic elections. We would never have made these strides if it was not for the incisive leadership of Comrade OR. He is the architect of our democratic society.

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We must pay heed to Tambo's warning and work together in developing a truly liberated, non-racial, united and equal society. Our country is currently facing a litany of challenges that require us to join hands and march in unison towards our common destination of a better and more prosperous South Africa.

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In the same spirit, we must concede that while we have endeavoured to provide basic services to the people of South Africa, there are perennial challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality that still confront us. South Africa remains an unequal society and the black majority, who were oppressed under apartheid, are still wallowing in the doldrums of poverty more than twenty years into the democratic dispensation.

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As the democratically elected government, we must strive the reverse the legacy of apartheid, which is deeply entrenched in our socio-economic conditions. We must find inspiration from the words of Amilcar Cabral, who once gave an injunction that: *“Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward and to guarantee the future of their children.”*

At this juncture in our democratic society, it is prudent that we seek wisdom from the profound words of this icon. Tambo articulated his vision clearly and eloquently when he said,

**“Racial discrimination, South Africa’s economic power, its oppression and exploitation of all the black peoples, are part and parcel of the same thing.”**

In this manner, Tambo gave us a forewarning that political freedom would be meaningless without economic freedom. It for this reason that we need all hands on deck in our endeavour to promote inclusive growth and transforming the economy and society for the benefit of all South Africans.

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The passing of Comrade OR in 1993, shortly after the tragic death of another stalwart, Chris Hani, might have expedited the negotiations process for the first democratic elections in South Africa. When we went to the polls on 27 April 1994, many of us had OR Tambo in mind. For we knew that he spent his lifetime fighting for the freedom of our people. The dawn of democracy was indeed the triumph of human spirit.

# 7. Conclusion

In summing up this presentation, one can confidently say OR Tambo was a selfless individual and a man of principle. He was ethical leadership personified. He was everything that you could envision from an ideal leader. His humility and incisive words of wisdom reverberate from beyond the grave.

It is no doubt that one of Tambo's most outstanding traits was that of a unifier. The most fitting tribute that we can pay to him is to reinforce unity, social cohesion and nationhood amongst all South Africans. He devoted his life to the liberation struggle so that we can enjoy the fruits of freedom today. We must cherish our freedom and democracy in honour of Tambo and all those who sacrificed their lives.

They clearly have not learned from the recent sentencing of the hooligans behind the "Coffin Assault." Our law must ensure that actions such as this one are punishable and offenders are sent to long prison sentences. These incidents go against our spirit of Nation Building and Social Cohesion. They portray us as the "skunk of the world" that President Mandela spoke about so contemptuously in his inaugural address on 10 May 1994. The life of OR Tambo should be a constant reminder that our freedom was not free. We honour all the martyrs who paid the ultimate price in pursuit of our freedom. We say their lives were not lost in vain.



**The best way to pay tribute to Tambo is to uphold the values and the vision that he stood for and cherished during his lifetime.**

Let us derive inspiration from the incisive leadership and selflessness of Tambo. Tambo's name will never be erased from the face of history. His wisdom is deeply entrenched in our collective memory.





NGIYATHOKOZA

DANKIE **KE A LEBOGA**

NGIYABONGA

**NDIYABULELA**

INKOMU **NDI KHOU  
LIVHUHA**

*Thank you*