

AFRICA: CRY FOR FREEDOM

A continent bleeds, and a TV reporter dies telling the world how it is; but no-one knows what to do about it...

IT WAS A RIOT that my brother knew would come.

John had been sent to Johannesburg in November 1991 as the TV correspondent for the BBC. He had completed a stint as chief political correspondent in London, and was looking forward to one of the big political stories of the decade: the deconstruction of apartheid.

Running the reels of his first despatches to London, I realised that he had learnt well the lessons of the Georgist philosophy. For some years, he had helped me to edit *Land and Liberty*, so he was familiar with the thesis that the control of land was the cornerstone of political power.

It was not easy to dramatise that reality in terms of the day-to-day politics of the House of Commons, but his new assignment gave him greater scope to convey that lesson to the world.

His first story included footage of a white farmer who symbolically stooped to scoop up a handful of earth, which he slowly filtered through his fingers. Defiantly, the farmer warned that he would not yield his land to anyone. The parting shot was of the sun setting on a white South Africa. John knew that history was in the making. That, one day, the sun would rise on a multi-racial society in which the black man would reclaim his birth-right: land.

John chose, as his second assignment, a profile of the puppet president, Lucas Mangope, the primary school teacher who had been picked by Pretoria to run one of the "sovereign" homelands.

Reclining in his presidential seat, Mangope answered John's questions about Bophuthatswana, a pox of a country scattered across the map to

expose the pockets of black isolation and exploitation. All was quiet; but, warned John, "the harmony is deceptive." The people wanted jobs, health, homes. And as the South African regime was in the process of being forced to bend to the politics of democracy, so Bophuthatswana, too, would one day have to accommodate the realities of multi-racialism.

Under Mangope, people had suffered detention and authoritarianism. Those people, John sensed, realised that their future lay in a democratic South Africa into which the homelands would have to be reincorporated. A society in which everyone would enjoy equality of opportunity.

But on the question of sovereignty, President Mangope was adamant. "I will not budge," he insisted. He was master of his territory, and that was how it was going to remain.

Under John's questioning, the petty tyrant was firm: independence was a "heritage and a right", an "inalienable right", and he would "not budge" from this position...

TWO YEARS passed. The white regime was engulfed by the demands for one-man-one-vote. Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress, negotiating with President de Klerk, agreed a new constitution for South Africa. The elections were set for April 27, 1994.

John was right: the citizens of Bophuthatswana were determined not to be excluded from the benefits that they believed would flow from the right to vote. The civil service went on strike, to reinforce their demand for the right to vote as citizens of the new South Africa. The hapless President Mangope resisted,

and John was back in the capital, Mmabatho, to report on the riots.

The citizens of Bop had no doubt what was at stake. One of them, Timothy Morake, told the reporter from the *Weekend Star* (March 12): "For me, land and voting is about the same thing. I have to vote because I want to get my land back. We all want to go back to where we came from."

Resentment against Mangope was building up, wrote reporter John Perlman, because people were "yearning to have their land back, land now farmed by Mangope's rightwing associates".

In his despatch, filmed in the streets of Mmabatho on March 9, John reported that Mangope was still "refusing to budge". That evening, having filed his story, he returned to the scene with cameraman Glenn Middleton. They secured the first pictures of gun-shot victims being admitted to a clinic. This was the human cost of the fight for land. Despite the tight deadline, John was determined to inform the world. On the road to the TV station in Zeerust, where he was to satellite out his film, his car crashed and he died.

Thirty-six hours later President Mangope was under arrest. His regime fell, and the citizens of Bophuthatswana had won the right to fight for their land through the ballot box.

A NEW ERA is dawning in South Africa. The need for drastic action is illustrated by new statistics on income from the Development Bank of South Africa, which reveal that 75% of black women and 60% of black men in the northern and eastern Transvaal received no income in 1991. There was limited opportunity to find

work in the formal economy or to earn a decent living in subsistence agriculture.

The report noted the obvious: these people were restrained by lack of services, assets and access to credit. "Though the situation is worse in the drought-prone northern Transvaal than in the eastern Transvaal, there is still hope," according to the report. "People find innovative ways of dealing with poverty. Poverty alleviation programmes should recognise people's coping strategies and build on these by reducing impediments."

The biggest obstacle is the one that makes access to land all but impossible. The African National Congress realises this, but its plans do not inspire hope that the landless poor are about to enjoy a new deal.

In its bid for acceptability to the international community, the ANC has abandoned its radicalism. It does not intend to restructure the economy to give everyone a fair and equal deal. In fact, we now know that it has conspired with the de Klerk government to produce commitments that have as their consequence the preservation of power in the hands of those who already hold it.

The suspicion that this was so was confirmed a few weeks before the election, when a leaked letter confirmed that the ANC was committed to fiscal and monetary disciplines of the type dictated by the International Monetary Fund. The commitment was contained in a letter of intent sent by the South African government to the IMF, which the ANC's representative on the Transitional Executive Council's finance committee accepts as "binding".

The implications are clear enough, for the IMF's track record on economic development in other countries is unambiguous: unemployment and a cut in public services. Those are the consequences that an ANC government will have to swallow, in return for a five-year \$850m (£574m) loan for drought relief from the IMF.

IRONICALLY, the IMF letter has cut the ground beneath the man who has just been appointed by the ANC to implement its "reconstruction and development programme".

Professor Ben Turok is director of the Institute for African Alternatives.

He takes a tough stand against IMF-inspired policies, which he says are designed to protect "a new world order which recolonises, integrates and subordinates the Third World in a system of so-called free markets".

Prof. Turok wants investment in people, not on city centres. Cartels had to be destroyed by competition and the removal of generous tax exemptions. The fine words tumble out... "We want to overcome stagnation in industry and take up spare capacity. This will provide jobs and use internal investment productively, not for speculative purposes or unnecessary property development," he writes in a study called *Development and Reconstruction in SA*.

But even if Prof. Turok understood that the prime problem was with tenure-and-taxation, the ANC's binding commitment to uphold IMF policies means that South Africa cannot now expect a new start.

TO UNLOCK the talents of the under-class, in South Africa, something would have to be done about the control over land.

In the rural sector, 50,000 farmers own 87% of the land. This is a maldistribution which will provoke violence, as the landless blacks discover that the right to vote, after all, is meaningless, if it is not backed up

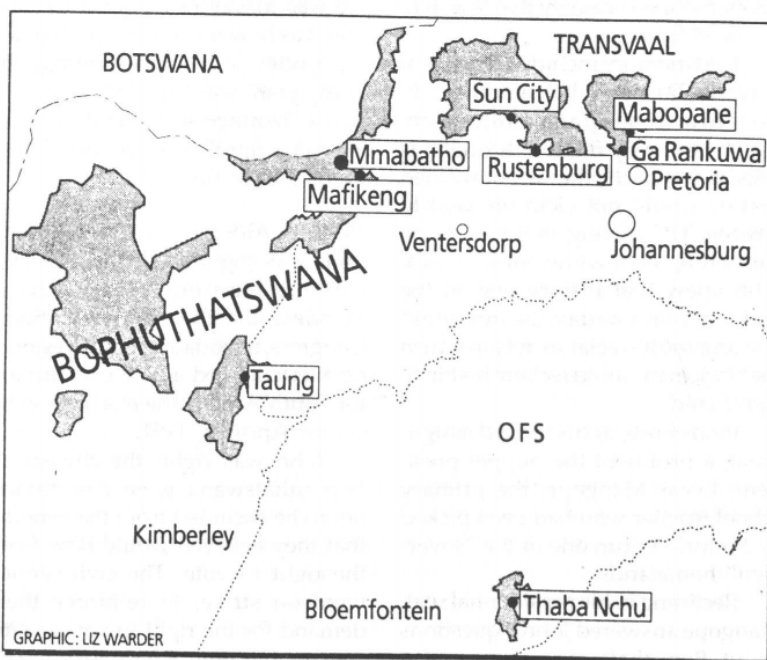
with the appropriate remedial policies.

Nelson Mandela has been hailed as the saviour of the oppressed people, but - no doubt unwittingly - he is locking his people into the same system of exploitation from which he was supposed to be liberating them. That became apparent during an election speech in February, when he assured white farmers that they had nothing to fear from an ANC government. He promised that their land would not be nationalised.

So now we can reasonably predict that South Africa will share a similar fate to Zimbabwe's. There, the war of liberation was all about land, too. Socialist Prime Minister Robert Mugabe tried to meet the aspirations of the thousands of families who are crammed on the reservations, but post-colonial prosperity proved elusive. The result: intemperate threats to nationalise land, on the one hand, while handcuffing the country to the IMF, on the other hand.

Zimbabwe was driven by desperation into the IMF's net. As part of the conditions for cash, Zimbabwe had to adopt trade policies that have severely damaged its industrial base. Manufacturing output in the first half of 1993 was 19% lower than in 1992, which was in turn 12% lower than in 1991.

A similar fate awaits 13 other



African countries that are reeling under the impact of a massive devaluation. The IMF is hastily trying to negotiate the terms for new loans to countries like Senegal and Niger, none of them led with the imagination necessary to haul them out of their poverty-stricken state. The IMF wants to maintain the value of the debts these countries owe to the rich creditor nations. For the African societies, however, the price will be measured in the further cut-back in public services that are already paltry.

Black South Africans can expect an equally grim future. The dual economy will continue to function: the prosperity gap between white and black will continue to widen, save for token successes that will rely on policies of reverse discrimination. For the millions of poor, the benefits will be barely visible. One day, out of desperation, Mr. Mandela's successors will decide to radicalise their policies. What are their options?

THERE IS NO POINT in reviewing the alternative strategies, because they have all been put to the test, and have failed.

The only policy that provides a balanced approach to social and economic renewal hinges on the reform of public finance. The essence of that policy is that taxes on labour and capital, on consumption and production, have to be abolished. Instead, the public sector has to be financed out of the rent of land.

There is no "shock therapy" attached to this policy, which can be phased in with minimal disturbance to the present social and economic structures. The strategy is underpinned by the most powerful of all notions of social justice, one that flows from the recognition that the resources of nature - in which South Africa is particularly well blessed - is the common heritage of mankind.

There is no need to talk about the nationalisation of farmland: farmers can keep all the hectares they possess, providing they pay the market-determined rental value of their land to the community.

There is no need to confiscate the diamond and gold mines from the corporations, providing they profit from their capital investments and

reserve the value of natural resources for the benefit of everyone in society.

There is no need to coerce people into adopting alien life-styles, providing those who live well now do not expect to preserve privileges that are denied to others. All the kinks in society, in fact - which originate in the maldistribution of the benefits of nature's fertility and sub-soil riches - would correct themselves naturally.

All of this is available through the process of liberating everyone to pursue his or her aspirations without let or hindrance. And the key precept for accomplishing this goal is this: people should pay for the benefits that they receive.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE infrastructure for this strategy is already in place, in South Africa. Most municipalities already administer a property tax based on the value of urban sites.

Even so, ingrained attitudes will present an obstacle to the policy. This became clear in March when the ANC revealed its plan to cut property tax rebates to residential property owners. The rebates are granted to homeowners so that they do not pay as much as businesses, on the grounds that businesses place greater strains on roads and services.

The ANC is searching for revenue to finance the development of black areas. The tax rebate, which black politicians regard as a discount for privileged whites, has become a target for additional finance.

When he heard about the plan, Johannesburg city councillor Paul Asherson threatened to lead a boycott "on a scale never seen before" if an ANC government interfered with the arrangement, which is "a mechanism that ensures residents pay a reasonable and correct rate [tax], but allows the city to collect twice that rate from business."

The justification for the tax rebate is a fallacious one, of course. The value of land occupied by homes, factories and offices is a precise measure of the social benefits of occupying those sites. Owners, bidding for the land in the market, set the value of their sites by freely negotiating the price. Those rents are the most effective declaration of the value placed by occupiers themselves on the value of the public

amenities available to them. They should therefore expect to pay a corresponding amount for the benefit of using the services.

As Cas Coovadia, a Johannesburg civic leader, put it: "The people in Soweto could never get a rates rebate because they have no industrial base. It's crazy that I, who could afford to pay the full amount of my rates bill, should be subsidised."

Mr Coovadia understands that the transition to a fairer and more efficient society will entail changes in the system of public finance: "Until we can look at a new and more equitable rates system, we need to begin somewhere to address the backlog. This is where the real crunch comes. Change means sacrifice...and we need to address unfair situations."

In fact, the sacrifice, in this case, does not entail the loss of something to which the white homeowners are fairly entitled. There is no legitimate reason to preserve a practice in which a numerically small section of the community - the landowners - have biased the property tax in their favour and against private enterprise.

A FAIR system of public finance is one in which, ultimately, everyone wins. But someone has to explain these facts to the people. Given the present level of understanding, that is not about to be done by representatives of the ANC, or any other political group.

South Africa's new constitution embodies philosophies of taxation and of property rights which will work against a smooth transition to a just society, and will militate against an efficient system for producing the wealth of the new nation.

John Harrison of the BBC understood this. When we last met, at our mother's funeral five weeks before his death, he told me about his plans. After the excitement of the first free elections, he intended to turn his hand to making documentary films. These would enlarge the vision of leaders like Nelson Mandela, who publicly acknowledged John's death as a loss to Africa. That, we now know, was not to be.

But someone must continue the work. Otherwise, the children of Africa will forever cry for freedom.