

Editorial

Tata Madiba

The Soweto Gospel Choir bursts into song in a slick video circulating on YouTube under the heading ‘Tata Madiba’ (‘Dear Madiba’ – President Mandela’s tribal name). The video has caused some controversy in South Africa.* Shoppers at Woolworths stand and listen, unused to hearing shopworkers rendering *Asimbonanga*. Some shed a tear, for the resonant singing is occasioned by Madiba’s death, at the end of a long and fruitful life.

Some years ago, in 1998, President Nelson Mandela had asked the key question about nuclear weapons:

‘... why do they need them, anyway? In reality, no rational answer can be advanced to explain in a satisfactory manner what, in the end, is the consequence of Cold War inertia and an attachment to the use of the threat of brute force to assert the primacy of some States over others.’

He was addressing the UN General Assembly in the fiftieth anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We reprint excerpts from that speech, which reflect his characteristic clear thinking and common humanity. His unmistakable voice, spoken at a measured pace, resounds from the page. For, in the course of two decades, South Africa went from being a proliferator of nuclear weapons technology to nuclear disarmament and the leading proponent of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in Africa. In 1979, the ‘South Atlantic Flash’ had alerted the United States and others to advanced co-operation on nuclear weapons testing between Israel and apartheid South Africa. This story has never been fully told, but Professor Leonard Weiss of Stanford University has continued to probe what happened in the southern ocean more than 30 years ago. We publish his informative account.

Some years earlier, in 1962, Bertrand Russell had identified the South African Government as ‘the polecat of the Western world’, on account of its disregard for the basic human rights of the majority of its citizens and savage treatment of its opponents. Mandela was just beginning his 28-year-long imprisonment, in the company of many others. The British Government was selling *Buccaneer* bomber aircraft to the ‘murderous’ South African regime. Russell with others campaigned long and hard against British complicity with the Apartheid State, and there was an eventual shift, but only after 15 planes had already been delivered to South

Africa, some of which were subsequently used in attacks against Angola.

In 1989, shortly before soon-to-be President Mandela was eventually released from prison, the Conservative Party sent a small delegation to South Africa, apparently paid for by an arms company. David Cameron, then working at Conservative Central Office, participated in the delegation. Also around in South Africa at that time, it seems, was Dr David Kelly, the weapons specialist who was to die a lonely death on Harrowdown Hill in 2003. In the 1980s, Mrs Thatcher had been reluctant to press too hard for Mandela's release (see FT cutting), as revealed in documents newly released by the Public Records Office. What was the purpose of that delegation in 1989, and what did it accomplish? Will the Prime Minister tell us?

Mandela, himself, was rather more generous to his opponents. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he recounted negotiating a cease-fire to end hostilities with South African President F W de Klerk, in a chapter entitled 'Talking with the Enemy'. In December 1989, Mandela made the case to de Klerk that the best way to move forward was to unban the ANC and all other political organisations, to lift the State of Emergency, to release political prisoners, and to allow the exiles to return. President Mandela wrote:

'The meeting was an exploratory one and I understood that nothing was going to be resolved that day. But it was extremely useful, for I had taken the measure of Mr de Klerk just as I had with new prison commanders when I was on Robben Island. I was able to write to our people in Lusaka that Mr de Klerk seemed to represent a true departure from the National Party politicians of the past. Mr de Klerk, I said, echoing Mrs Thatcher's famous description of Mr Gorbachev, was a man we could do business with.'

The tough and difficult legacy of apartheid in South Africa endures. In this issue, Beverley Naidoo recounts the death of Dr Neil Aggett, medic and trade union activist, in Johannesburg Police Headquarters in 1982, at the age of 28. More than 30 years on, she writes, 'Neil's story offers insights into a veiled and forgotten history'. But it might also 'shine a light on the present'. A medical advocacy programme there was recently renamed the 'Dr Neil Aggett Unit', recognising that issues which concerned Neil are 'present in contemporary South Africa'. Dr Aggett's 'spirit of dedication and critical analysis', say the Unit's sponsors, might usefully be emulated by young medical practitioners today.

**Duane Jethro's interesting critique of the Woolies video is at africaisacountry.com/consuming-woolworths-tribute-to-nelson-mandela/*