

Veteran ANC member, Robert McBride, made a special trip to Belfast to give the annual Bobby Sands lecture on Friday, May 5. Born in Durban in 1963, Robert McBride became famous in South Africa during apartheid as being a leading member of the ANC military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, and spent time on Death Row, before the fall of the regime. He took part in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and is now Chief of Police in Johannesburg. Hundreds gathered to listen to the speech and gave Robert McBride a standing ovation.

Bobby Sands Memorial Lecture 2006:



UBUNTU

Robert McBride (ANC)

"Robert McBride, former political prisoner and member of the African National Congress, said as an outside he was independent but he was not neutral on the issue of Ireland's centuries old struggle. "My background is one of struggle against imperialism, colonialism, discrimination and oppression. From a conceptual point of view as a person involved in struggle, I can never accept the idea of a foreign government maintaining control of another country. The very rightness of the republican aspiration will ensure the ending of occupation," said McBride."

"It's very difficult to write a speech about such a momentous moment in the history of a people. There's a quotation in Zulu of a saying we have in South Africa which we use to guide our lives. "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", a person is a person through other people. I am human because others are human with me. This philosophy we call "ubuntu." It is a philosophy of humanness and of respect and dignity.

The way in which we treat and regard other human beings is an indication of our own humanity or absence of it. In regard to other people who are different to us we should respect the differences, their beliefs and traditions.

We have more in common than separates us. The fact that we are human beings is commonality enough for us to work out the rest. Ubuntu, humanness, respect, touches on the way we conduct ourselves and interact with other people, the messages we send in our conduct in regard to other people.

Ubuntu is not unique to South Africa, it is a universal tradition, it is found in all peoples, it is an aspect of mutual respect. When Gerry Adams and John Hume released their joint statement in April 1993 they touched on it, and one paragraph in particular indicates the intention of the two leaders.

"Every one has a solemn duty to change the political process away from conflict and towards national reconciliation which meets a peaceful accommodation between the people of Britain and Ireland and between the Irish people themselves."

These words are crucial because they deal with the differences that are a reality on this island and the intentions to deal with them. The practice of ubuntu will ensure peaceful co existence between people with different beliefs and traditions. However to deprive people of their right to dignity and respect is to ensure conflict will emerge.

It's against this background that I want to highlight the importance of today. The month of May has significance for Irish Martyrs in two different eras. Irish martyrs in different eras, 65 years apart, gave their lives because their and their nation's right to dignity and respect was being trampled upon. On both of these occasions the actions and dedication of these martyrs ignited a nation and enhance further commitment to the struggle. It gave the people a will to fight.

1916 and 1981 – milestones of the Irish march to freedom

The impact of 1916 and 1981 forever changed the political landscape of the Irish march to freedom. Bobby Sands, like Major John McBride before him and countless generations of Irish men and women, refused to be trampled upon. They decide to fight against a system that degraded them.

For Bobby Sands the decision and that of his fellow comrades not to be classified and treated as criminals was a fundamental act at a particular time in Irish history in which the legitimacy of the struggle was being questioned.

Prior to Bobby Sands period of imprisonment he was an activist and fighter in the struggle. He was an organiser within his community. He had farsightedness. A critical aspect of his character that is important for all liberation fighters, all over the world wherever and whenever they emerge, is contained in the poem 'The Rhythm of Time' .

The Rhythm of Time speaks to all of us and it evokes an emotion that is difficult to explain to those who have never engaged in struggle. And every time you read it, and most of you know it as part of his writings, it evokes that emotion, as indelible and irremovable as time immemorial. The poem itself has become one of the aspects of the Rhythm of Time that Bobby Sands speaks of.

When he was jailed for the second time, his commitment to the struggle did not dampen, he continued to write, organise and struggle. And when he had no other option he decided to fight for his dignity with his very life. He was fully aware of the risks and he was mature enough to know the possibilities. Attempts to criminalise the struggle by the British government failed dismally with his election as MP for the constituency of Fermanagh South Tyrone. Bobby Sands and his comrades died for their dignity, the struggle and the people. They died for a new tomorrow.

Don't allow the pain and the hurt of the past to blind us

Today the scene in Ireland has been set for that new tomorrow. A new situation has arisen. Admittedly the situation is fraught with dangers, fraught with risks as it was in 1916 and 1981. But the new situation also presents new opportunities.

For the sake of the future and with our minds on the sacrifices made over the centuries in all parts of the world, it is incumbent on all of us that the opportunities are recognised. The opportunities can be seen if we don't allow the pain and the hurt of the past to blind us.

We need to see them through different eyes. We need to see them through eyes that believe in a new tomorrow where our only revenge will be the laughter of our children. If the new situation is seen only in bitterness and anger than new opportunities will be missed. The revolution will falter

because smaller issues will get in the way.

THE RHYTHM OF TIME

By Bobby Sands (Pseudonym Marcella, H-Block, Long Kesh Prison Camp)

*There's an inner thing in every man,
Do you know this thing my friend?
It has withstood the blows of a million years,
And will do so to the end.*

*It was born when time did not exist,
And it grew up out of life,
It cut down evil's strangling vines,
Like a slashing searing knife.*

*It lit fires when fires were not,
And burnt the mind of man,
Tempering leadened hearts to steel,
From the time that time began.*

*It wept by the waters of Babylon,
And when all men were a loss,
It screeched in writhing agony,
And it hung bleeding from the Cross.*

*It died in Rome by lion and sword,
And in defiant cruel array,
When the deathly word was 'Spartacus',
Along the Appian Way.*

*It marched with Wat the Tyler's poor,
And frightened lord and king,
And it was emblazoned in their deathly stare,
As e'er a living thing.*

*It smiled in holy innocence,
Before conquistadors of old,
So meek and tame and unaware,
Of the deathly power of gold.*

*It burst forth through pitiful Paris streets,
And stormed the old Bastille,
And marched upon the serpent's head,
And crushed it 'neath its heel.*

*It died in blood on Buffalo Plains,
And starved by moons of rain,
Its heart was buried in Wounded Knee,
But it will come to rise again.*

*It screamed aloud by Kerry lakes,
As it was knelt upon the ground,
And it died in great defiance,
As they coldly shot it down.*

*It is found in every light of hope,
It knows no bounds nor space,
It has risen in red and black and white,
It is there in every race.*

*It lies in the hearts of heroes dead,
It screams in tyrants' eyes,
It has reached the peak of mountains high,
It comes seating 'cross the skies*

*It lights the dark of this prison cell,
It thunders forth its might,
It is 'the undaunted thought', my friend,
That thought that says 'I'm right!'*

The way forward must be approached with the aim of securing a peaceful and just society for generations to come, based on the principles of ubuntu. In other words we must dare to hope and work harder to realise those hopes.

Doing a Sands

I want to touch on the effects of the Irish hunger strikes in South Africa. In May 1981 when the news came out of Bobby Sands' death it affected that way in which we responded to our situation in prison.

A short time later Nelson Mandela led a struggle to improve our prison conditions. Prison conditions in South Africa were changed and improved. It opened our eyes to a new way of resistance in prison, where before we may have meekly submitted, we now understood there was a new weapon to use.

I myself was to go on hunger strike on a number of occasions during my imprisonment. The code word for resistance through hunger strike in prison was "doing a Sands". It gave us a method to rally around issues and keep our cohesiveness within prison.

The relationship of Ireland and South Africa through the catalyst of hunger strikes did not start with. In the 1920's after the death of the Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, the ANC general

secretary sent messages of support in what was to be the first contact between the ANC and Sinn Féin. At that time both were fledgling organisations.

Influence on freedom struggles throughout the world

The death of Terence MacSwiney influenced other struggles throughout the world. It influence the struggle in India where Mahatma Ghandi became aware and organised resistance. It is also said that Ho Chi Minh, how was in Europe at the time of MacSwiney's death, went on to organise Indo-china's communist society.

The similarities and connections between our struggles can all be explained within Ubuntu and acknowledged within the Rhythm of Time. It's important to remember this as Ireland moves into a sensitive period in the march towards freedom. Every action we do has an impact on that march. Every action either contributes or impedes nation building.

Under the present circumstances the physical force tradition is no longer being used as a means of achieving our objectives but this doesn't mean we are in a weaker position, we are simply exploiting other forms of struggle.

To make peace we have to engage with our enemies and in the particular situation in this part of Ireland the Republican Movement has gone out of its way to open up engagement. I think it is time the process of nation building gets underway.

At the present time there are a number of concerns, the issue of policing. Policing doesn't exist on its' own, policing has to secure a mandate from the people and in a democratic society they should be accountable to elected representatives. Policing in a democratic society has to be based on human rights and inclusiveness. It cannot be unaccountable or partisan.

A police service cannot claim to be neutral if it is still monitoring, spying, interfering with those it perceives as its political enemies, especially in the absence of violence. A democratic police force should be protecting the interests of all political parties and all political discourse. At some stage republicans will have to get involved with policing, the time when that happens is the prerogative of the republican movement.

Ireland's freedom fighters – never before so close to victory

Never before has Ireland been as close as it is now to the resolution of the problem that has impeded it for centuries. It is the closest to victory its freedom fighters have ever been. It is important to recognise that. The journey to reach this stage of the struggle has involved many sacrifices. The 1981 hunger strike and the Rising in 1916 are two seminal events that have change the coarse of history on this island.

I have had a number of discussions with people here and was agree that armed struggle is in some ways easier. It is easier to measure your successes. If you plan to blow down a building and that building is brought down, then you can see your success.

When the battlefield becomes political struggle is not always so easy to judge, to evaluate. It involves long-term complex strategies that require patience. It is a difficult period and its important that people understand that it is every ones responsibility to be part of the march forward. We owe it to the memories of those who have sacrificed their lives."

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