

Emerging from a Dark Night of the Soul

I use this term “*dark night of the soul*” a bit loosely. Strictly speaking, the term means a spiritual crisis in a journey to know God. I think that St John of the Cross coined the phrase in his poem, while he was helping St Theresa with a reform project. Mother Theresa of Calcutta chose that saint’s name because she herself also had a very long “dark night of the soul” for decades through her years of ministry.

Well, this term came to light today when I heard some remarks made by Trevor Manuel at an event in Rwanda recently. He is a struggle stalwart, an ex-Finance Minister and a very outspoken critic of the regime that is now waning. Here is what he said, that inspired this C4L Bulletin:

“The key thing is, there needs to be action; there need to be consequences for people who have acted incorrectly. People must go to jail, there is no question about it. People must go to jail...”

“And if the first big investment that President Ramaphosa makes is an adequate supply of handcuffs and orange uniforms, which is what people wear in prison, then so be it...”

“We have to demonstrate that change happened, forcefully, and that we will not tolerate corruption in the public service...”

“A number of us were appointed ministers before the age of 40, and so we could energise a public service with young, enthusiastic people who believed in the same values...”

“What happened is that the vision, determination and impact of service was replaced by politics that’s a lot more venal.”

This really struck a chord with me! C4L was launched in 1999. That was the same year that Nelson Mandela’s presidency ended.

His successor, Thabo Mbeki, did not handle the HIV/AIDS pandemic well at all. In short, he screwed up. A Harvard University study reckons that his “beetroot and garlic” homegrown alternative to ARV treatment caused about 350 000 citizens to perish – who did not need to. On a smaller scale, he was like Lenin, Stalin and Mao – killing people with policy not with weapons.

During this period, C4L began to “speak truth to power” at a provincial level. Obviously NGOs like Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) had a better-known national voice. C4L was a new and small organization, but it cut its teeth in Public Engagement during this period.

Finally Mbeki was pushed out by Jacob Zuma and his “vindictive triumphalists” in 2009. One of the few good things that Zuma did as President was to change Mbeki’s HIV and AIDS policy. The roll-out of ARVs has helped to lengthen the lives of those infected and thus reduce the stigma among those affected or at risk. But in almost every other way, Zuma captained a sinking ship.

Does anyone remember the American president before Franklin Roosevelt? FDR was so good and memorable that I myself have to look up who presided over the crash of 1929 and the advent of the Great Depression. It was Herbert Hoover, a one-termer. He will forever be hard to remember - in the shadow of FDR, a three-termer. This is also why Mbeki and worse yet Zuma will be hard to remember for long. Because they emerged in the shadow of Nelson Mandela, and nothing grows in the shade. They were both colossal disappointments.

Nelson Mandela's personal favorite in terms of his successor has finally been elected by the ANC as its president, and then forced Zuma to resign as State President this year - well ahead of the next elections. Ramaphosa has a background as an activist with the Student Christian Movement, as a trade-union organizer, as one of the authors of the Constitution, and then a stint in the world of Big Business. He did not live in exile during the Struggle like Mbeki and Zuma, nor in prison like Mandela. He has been working on this "Democracy project" for a very long time.

Within only a few years of Zuma's election as State President, C4L began to detect corruption and patronage even in NGOs. You have to remember that C4L started as a training centre for NGO Management, so we took exception to this contamination entering the sphere of Civil Society. We stood up to it. At the time – in 2012 – the Judiciary was under huge pressure to capitulate to the new approach and even to validate it. As for Parliament and its oversight role/responsibility, Trevor Manuel used the word "euthanized" to describe its condition during this period.

The truth is that these "vindictive triumphalists" were using various strategies to try to stage what some have described as a "silent coup". They took steps like closing the Scorpions – the only effective corruption-busting unit at the time. (This move was later declared by the highest court to be unconstitutional.) They went totally Stalinist in terms of state surveillance and illegally spying on citizens. And the boundary between the police and organized crime often faded. Top cops like Jackie Selebi ended up in jail, and the internal battles of law enforcement seem to devour more time and resources than fighting crime!

Thank God that one province – the Western Cape – voted in an opposition party. And that one of the Section 9 institutions (i.e. ombudsman) called the Public Protector took a principled stand – heroically. And that finally in the last municipal elections, the major cities almost all scrapped the ANC - shifting about 50 percent of spending at the local level to opposition parties.

By contrast, Mpumalanga province has consistently had the highest density of ANC vote of any province. It is an ANC strong-hold. So when I speak of a "dark night of the soul" I am talking about danger and isolation for whistleblowers. Between 1998 and 2011, seventeen whistleblowers were gunned down. It was always in January, and only three survived. It was a death-squad scenario. It was and is intimidating, and intentionally so.

Government was but an after-thought. The party ruled the roost, in good Socialist fashion. While Triumphalists tried to "capture" the Judiciary and law enforcement (like closing the Scorpions), they loosened the confines around State Surveillance and very often the local Mafia worked for the SS apparatus as its data collectors. This collusion of triumphalists, "spooks" and criminals is what has caused me to walk through a "dark night of the soul" for the past five years.

But in 2018 we are finally coming out of it. The atmosphere has changed remarkably. "State capture" has been identified and exposed and there are several investigations going on. Stalwarts like Trevor Manuel (quoted above) are insisting on a return to the Rule of Law. The cause-and-effect of this malpractice to economic downturn has sunk in, with the Electorate. The proverbial pennies have dropped. This places C4L and its own portfolio of litigations in a much more promising position.

About half of our C4L cases are now behind us – and we have not lost one yet. But as we press forward, some NGO workers may be going to jail as a result. The cost burden has been almost too much for C4L to bear, but concluding some cases should mean recovery of costs and the respective awards. But it has been hard, cold sledding through a blizzard of risks that basically obliterated

visibility at times. But by stopping in a blizzard you risk freezing to death, so we kept moving forward.

Now the skies have cleared and we find ourselves out of that “dark night of the soul”. But still isolated and still a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord... Honesty. Integrity. Truth.

Yet I still walk where ever I go with a stun-gun in one pocket and pepper spray in the other, because there are pockets of resistance still holding out for their space. I agree with Trevor Manuel that these were and still are “venal”. Both punishment and restitution are the order of the day.