

Unveiling of a tombstone in honour of the late Sophie Masite

25 September 2010

Tribute by the Executive Mayor of the City of Johannesburg, Councillor Amos Masondo, on the occasion of the memorial and unveiling of a tombstone in honour of the late mayor of the Southern Metropolitan Local Council (SMLC), Comrade Sophie Masite, ST Paul's Anglican Church, Ipelegeng Centre, White City - Soweto - Johannesburg

Programme Directors: Kebby Maphatsoe and MEC Nandi Mayathula-Khoza

Father Canon T Mncube

Leaders of Faith Based Organisations

Umndeni wakwa Masite

All ANC leaders

COSATU, SANCO and South African Communist Party Leaders

Members of the Provincial Legislature

Executive Mayors

Members of the Mayoral Committee

All elected public representatives

Fellow Councillors

Leaders of organizations of Civil Society

Members of the Community

Comrades and Friends

Programme Director, we are gathered here today to pay tribute to one of the unsung heroines of our struggle. Comrade Sophie Masite, has touched many lives. She has meant different things to different people.

I would like to thank everyone present here today for taking time in their busy schedules to be part of this unique and important occasion to celebrate the life of Comrade Masite.

Programme Director, we gather here, a day after National Heritage Day. The purpose of Heritage Day, as we know, is to remember and celebrate our cultural heritage.

Comrade Sophie would have been proud to see South Africans across the spectrum coming together to affirm our struggle for a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and a prosperous South Africa. She would be delighted that the fight to lay a foundation for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by the law, continues. She would have been equally pleased to know that the message of the Freedom Charter that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity, is finding more and a better expression as we march into the future.

Programme Director, some years ago, in the early 1980s, I became a member of an organisation called the Detainee Aids Movement (DAM). This was an organisation meant to help detainees. The detainees were people who were held in solitary confinement and detained in apartheid police stations or prisons, indefinitely. They were arrested, usually at night and in the early hours of the morning, doors were broken down and reports of assaults of family members were common. They had no access to lawyers, priests, relatives or loved ones. The impact of state brutality and repression was not just limited to affected families and individuals. It reverberated throughout society. A cloud of fear, trepidation and uncertainty engulfed neighbours and local communities. It was a situation that was in many ways similar to the experiences of ordinary men and women in Nazi Germany, during the reign of Hitler and the Storm Troopers (SS).

I remember reading an article in a newspaper called the Rand Daily Mail about an Indian activist, Ahmed Timol, who was alleged to have jumped from the tenth floor window at John Vorster Square. He had been arrested for making a sophisticated bomb device that scattered "illegal" ANC pamphlets at Park Station in the CBD of Johannesburg. He had sustained injuries and died.

There were a number of these cases:

People who were alleged to have committed suicide whilst in detention by hanging themselves on their own shoelaces;

People who had slipped on a bar of soap and died, whilst taking a shower;

Individuals who had disappeared without trace whilst in the presence of the police such as Stanza Bopape;

People who had sustained injuries or died after undergoing various forms of torture.

Some of the well known names include, Dr Neil Aggett, Mkhuthuzi Mdluli, Biko, Tabalaza, Dipale and many others.

What is it that needed to be done?

Sophie did not hesitate. She took a stand. She stuck to principle.

The Detention Action Committee information booklet entitled: "You, Detention and the Law", says the following: "for those who believe in their cause, there is a duty to ensure that for every loss, there will be gains - every democrat detained must mobilise tens of thousands of supporters, scores of others must take their place, and continue their work, they will be strengthened in this knowledge. There are casualties in every struggle, but they must not deter us."

"Detainees must be supported, not out of sense of despair, nor out of charity. It is out of a sense of responsibility to one's friends and comrades, a sharing of their beliefs. They have the right to expect support, for it is the duty of those left behind to carry on their work....democrats have to face up to repression. We have to organise ourselves in advance for the inevitable onslaught by the state. We are in a long protracted struggle, maybe ten to twenty years more and there will be many more casualties. But we ourselves need this time to prepare ourselves, and South Africa, for democracy."

I met Sophie Masite at a meeting of the Detainee Aids Movement. This committee was amongst very few organisations that was concerned about lack of democracy and the setting in of a more vicious dictatorship. It worked together with both the Detainee Action Committee (DAC) and the Detainees Parents Support Committee (DPSC). Sophie did this support work and became a full time activist at the offices of the DPSC. She was conscious of what Pastor Niemor, in his famous words, had said of the situation in Germany: "they came for the Jews, I was not a Jew and I did nothing. They came for the Lutherans, again I did nothing for I was a Catholic. When they came for me, there was no one left."

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Programme Director, it is this work that has ensured that over time, South Africans in their diversity were able to craft a democratic constitution that is the envy of the world. This document which is the highest law of our land, accords everyone the right to security, which ensures that no citizen is deprived of freedom arbitrarily or without just cause; outlaws detention without trial; ensures freedom from all forms of violence from either the public or private sources; outlaws torture or punishment in a cruel, inhumane or degrading way; ensures the right to have privacy which includes protection from having ones home, property or possessions from being searched; and ensures that no infringement on their communications takes place; ensures political rights and protection from being deprived of ones' citizenship.

Programme Director, our past assists us to understand our present. The present on the other hand, provides us with a basis for a reasonable forecast of our future.

The role of the City in this regard (linking past, present and future), is to ensure that our heritage is protected and promoted. We do so, amongst others, by recognising our heritage; through places and buildings, by writing books and publications, producing films, theatre productions as well as doing other similar things.

Programme Director, it is perhaps appropriate that at a time like this, we should take time to reflect on some of the things that have been done to promote heritage in the past 16 years.

Over the past few years the City of Johannesburg has undertaken a number of interventions designed to promote and protect our heritage. This has been done in consultation with community groups and heritage associations. Some of the achievements to date include the following:

Acquiring and securing Chancellor House and obtaining funds to redevelop this important site where former President Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo had their legal offices in the 1950s.

The refurbishment of the Workers Museum in Newtown in partnership with Khanya College. This Museum was reopened to the public earlier this year and tells the story of migrant labour in Johannesburg.

Together with National and Provincial Government, through the Johannesburg Development Agency, the Fort Prison (Number 4) has been developed into the headquarters of the Constitutional Court and declared a Heritage site.

Mary Fitzgerald Square and Ghandi Square are now in place as heritage sites.

Mandela Bridge is now one of the recognised iconic symbolic heritage sites.

Newtown boasts of street names like Miriam Makeba, Gwigwi Mrebi, Kipi Moeketsi and others.

Others sites include, amongst other, Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital.

David Webster park in Troyeville and the Dorothy Nyembe park in Dobsonville.

The Drill Hall and the June 16 Heritage Trail.

We were able to purchase the Dr Xuma House in Sophiatown and we are in the process of restoring the house and producing exhibitions and programmes in partnership with the Trevor Huddleston Trust.

We are gathered here today, as we did at Dr Xuma's house yesterday, to acknowledge, affirm and attest in this community and the world that Sophie Masite is indeed our heroine.

This is a very special occasion that provides us with an opportunity to say in a few words that Sophie lived in difficult times but managed to acquit herself in a remarkable manner.

The house in which she lived is fondly remembered by many revolutionary democrats and activists as a haven and centre of hope and support. That is why, we are looking forward to installing a plaque here to remind ourselves and to teach future generations that once upon a time there lived a heroine worthy of the name, one we could clearly identify as one of and our own. A person who was committed to serving the people and creating a better life for all.

Sophie Masite was, as an activist, involved in many endeavours and made a huge impact. This includes her work:

As a member of the Soweto Student Representative Council (SSRC);

- in building street committees;
- in building the militant democratic youth movement;
- in setting up structures of the Federation of South African Women and deepening the struggle for gender equality and emancipation;
- In active and meaningful participation in the United Democratic Front;
- In helping to establish the ANC legal structures after 1990; and
- In leading the Southern Metropolitan Local Council.

She can quite correctly and accurately, be described as a leading pioneer in efforts aimed at building and developing democratic local government in Johannesburg. We salute her contribution, dedication and commitment.

Her untimely death in 1997 robbed the City and South Africa of a visionary leader and an energetic activist who was guided by the Freedom Charter as our lodestar. All of us gathered here today agree that Cde Sophie was a great leader.

If by leadership we mean:

the ability to persuade others to accomplish things together.

Getting people to go along and work together to accomplish something, being able to persuade others around what needs to be done and making that happen.

Bringing out the best in other people by sharing the best from within themselves.

Knowing that you have power but your responsibility is to serve, develop and empower others.

Connecting people both to each other and to a future that they want to see.

Ensuring many of us that we have talent and ability more than we think.

Modesty, selflessness and sacrifice.

Then Sophie was indeed a great leader of our people.

Not only was she a leader, but she was also a daughter, a mother, a sister, an aunt, a caregiver, a neighbour, a natural volunteer and a humane soul. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the family for providing space and allowing Sophie to be part of the bigger ANC family and to serve the poorest of the poor and humanity.

Thank you.

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