

**CHANGING THE GUARD: CHAMPION-MSIMANG-LUTHULI.
THE ANC IN NATAL, 1945-1951**

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At Durban on the 31st of May 1951, in a tumultuous general meeting of the Natal ANC, veteran rough and tumble Zulu politician A W G Champion was overthrown and removed from the provincial presidency, a post he had held since 1945. It was a dramatic defeat, signalling the end of old-line leadership opposed to the demands of the Congress Youth League for militant defiance of apartheid. The victor, as is well known, was Chief Albert J Luthuli, teacher, farmer, chief of a Christian Kholwa community, and a relative newcomer to national politics. Accounts of Champion's political demise have generally subordinated the event to wider perspectives, asserting more or less briefly and simply that it was determined by personal foibles and engineered by the Youth League. This paper attempts to draw out some details of Champion's presidency and its breakdown, in the belief that they may add to understanding of its circumstances.

The 1951 election itself serves well to open the issues, personalities and behaviour that shaped the confrontation and its outcome. Champion himself presided over his own downfall, occupying the chair throughout in violation of the normal practice of having the meeting chaired by the speaker of the house. In typical fashion, Champion had also arbitrarily set aside the constitutional provision for branch delegate voting and declared the meeting open to all, over-ruling a notice issued by Henry Selby Msimang as provincial secretary. [1] Behind this move was a struggle over control of membership and branches which could determine the election.

The meeting was, in fact, a resumption of one in January that had been aborted in an open quarrel between Champion and Msimang. The secretary had been loyal to Champion through thick and thin since the latter's accession, but the two had fallen out in the previous year when Msimang had accepted Youth League affiliation against Champion's will. Accusing Msimang of conspiring with the League to undermine him by establishing insurgent branches, Champion had demanded that the secretary obtain prior approval from the executive committee to form them, a policy Msimang rejected as a contravention of his constitutional duties. [2] Following the January meeting, Champion's subservient committee had declared Msimang suspended for insubordination and dereliction of duty. [3] Now, as the proceedings resumed, constitutionality became the ground on which the confrontation between the president and his opponents was fought to a finish.

At the outset the call for approval of the previous minutes became a debate of no confidence in the president. Luthuli protested against opening the vote to all: was this a properly constituted meeting or not? He had served on the Natal executive since Champion's accession in 1945 (itself unconstitutional), but had refused on constitutional principle to continue after 1949 when the annual conference had authorized Champion to appoint his own executive without elections in an effort to suppress opposition. At that time Msimang had supported Champion unreservedly and criticized Luthuli. [4] Now Msimang also objected to the open vote. Only branch delegates should vote. The president retorted that, in the absence of certified delegates, he could choose the method. He chose to involve all the people "in order to rebuild Congress".

Rebuilding Congress was surely in their minds when a member of the recently established Cato Manor branch objected to labelling it "unauthorized" and an "error". Champion retorted that there was only one Durban branch and only the executive committee would

decide when others should be opened. If the Congress was not satisfied they could remove him on a vote of no confidence. Youth Leaguer Selby Ngcobo jumped up to accuse him of lying to them about the reason for Msimang's dismissal. It was not insubordination, it was his chairmanship of the June 26 1950 Day of Protest strike which Champion had refused to lead despite the fact that he had presided at the public meeting with Indians, Coloureds and Whites when it had been decided on. The president angrily demanded Ngcobo retract his accusation. Anger filled the hall - so much so "that even the atmosphere ... smelled badly". Ngcobo withdrew his words and finally the vote for the minutes - a test of strength - was taken: 78 to 34. The numbers suggest that Champion's support was ample. They also seem surprisingly few, considering the reports that stressed the size and significance of the gathering. Clearly the ANC of Natal was hardly a "mass" party.

Had Champion packed the meeting? Clearly many believed so. But the votes began to go against him when Luthuli, observing that since the chair insisted the conference was for the public - the nation - moved that the executive committee's report, which was a bill of charges against Msimang, was no report at all of the nation's affairs and should be rejected. Champion was this time defeated 80 to 84. Numbers were increasing, people were entering the hall.

Selby Msimang now spoke in his own defence. He emphasized loyalty to the national cause, not to Champion. Accepting the Youth League was just carrying out a decision of the national executive. His real "fault", therefore, was his diligence in obeying this mandate. His second "fault" was to accept and carry out the agreement for the Day of Protest on June 26 1950, at what he had taken to be Champion's invitation. Only later, he said, when Champion said he had just been "tempting" him to take this measure, did Msimang realize with a "fright" that the president had hoped to involve him in a debacle. Realizing these things, he had refused to make reports or to hand over the records to the "illegal" executive committee (ignoring his own support of its appointment in 1949). Finally, he struck a dominant note of personal criticism for Champion: his "liking for hero-worship". To follow him in his way, said Msimang, would be "destroying the nation".

Champion apparently expected Msimang to be his opponent in the election to follow, as did many others. Remarking simply that nothing the secretary had said contradicted the charges against him, he proceeded to the nominations for president. Only that morning, however, Youth League leaders had approached Luthuli and asked him to stand. He agreed when Msimang, who was also being touted by some of the leaders of the League, withdrew. Champion called for a division of the house, his supporters on one side, Luthuli's on the other. But, as the day had worn on, changes had taken place in the composition of the body. In accordance with Champion's procedure, people were being brought in by both sides, recruited from the street, tea-rooms, offices and sports grounds. Perhaps Champion miscalculated. Later he insisted that he had intended the result, counting Luthuli's supporters until they were a majority, because he had already decided to "retire" and to do it dramatically. Heads were counted, the vote was close: 115 Luthuli; 105 Champion. [5] Champion rose then and there, called Luthuli to the platform and handed him into the chair. Luthuli later said it was "a fair majority". [6] True enough, yet it was a close one for an event since considered to be a dramatic repudiation of an isolated and compromised leader and a decisive choice for a new course of action.

Immediately after, in letters and articles to the press, Champion justified himself. "To me the Congress leadership had become a curse." He was "more than satisfied", he wrote, for he knew he was increasingly disliked, even hated by some, and people avoided the Congress because of it. The times demanded a popular voice expressed in a popular vote. As for packing, he had invited the Youth League to bring their friends and vote. They packed it themselves. "About 70 people came from ... tea rooms and circuses ... If I had aimed at returning to office I would have refused to admit them." And so he let "the educated class of our people" win. Few have accepted at face value Champion's claim to have deliberately engineered his retirement, even though one can see good reasons from his own perspective to

have done so and he had spoken of it for some months. [7] More typically, for example, Bill Bhengu, a Youth Leaguer who had also been Champion's protégé and later a prominent Durban lawyer, sees it as a rationalization for a plan gone awry as Champion's supporters wearied of waiting and were literally "out to lunch" while the Youth League energetically imported their own recruits. Dividing the house was a means to intimidate voters that failed. [8]

Champion went on: because he could not accept the tactics of the Programme of Action, he was seen as a bar to progress. But he could not promote boycotts and strikes "with the forces at my disposal ... I am in favour of war", he insisted, "but war without weapons is committing suicide. I am not in favour of committing political suicide, because by doing that we are helping our oppressors." He had now washed his hands of responsibility, but he wanted Congress to succeed. "I want freedom. If this Congress ... can do this I would be pleased." He complimented Luthuli: "I hand over to a better man. Time will show if he has really a larger following than me." There was slyness in this, of course, for Champion could not let go without exercising his inveterate habit of mixing his signals and sowing seeds of ambiguity, and he let it be known that he viewed the new leaders with scepticism and the Youth League with scorn - "people who are inexperienced and know nothing yet think they know something". He said he doubted they could do better and would come to respect him from the vantage of their own experience. He suggested they had been shown up by accepting his unconstitutional overthrow. "Luthuli ... always insisting [on] legal procedure ... did not refuse to take part in ... my illegal procedure." He could not resist a parting shot at Msimang, and warned Luthuli: "I do not give him any hopes concerning his secretary." [9]

For the participants of 1951, Champion's overthrow would have evoked ironic echoes and wry memories of 1945. The two events bear comparison. Then Champion was the insurgent and challenger, the hope of the frustrated and the disaffected; John L Dube the conservative, his independent and somnolent Natal Native Congress the thorn in the side of a resurgent ANC under Alfred Xuma. Rivalry between Dube and Champion was a centre-piece of African politics from the 1920s, with Champion the brash ICU activist. In 1927, according to Champion, urged by ANC president Gumede, he helped Chief Stephen Mini attempt a take-over of Dube's secessionist Natal branch. Both sides packed the meeting, and Dube was out-voted, resulting in his formation of the independent NNC. [10] By the 1940s Dube was in decline. Champion, active in national politics since the late 1930s and increasingly prominent (and respectable) as a newly elected member of the Natives' Representative Council for rural Natal in 1942, moved to centre stage with Xuma's encouragement and the active support of local members of the group that was then forming the Youth League. For example, his successful sponsorship of a well advertised Conference of Educated Africans in 1943 was a conscious appeal for support against Dube and won him recognition as a leader to revitalize Natal politics. "[After] years of a static and colourless political life", *Ilanga lase Natal* enthused, "At last the people want to have a say, and Champion is that say." Youth Leaguers Jordan Ngubane and Selby Ngcobo, active in the conference, saw Champion opening up the chances for youth and courted him to take the leadership in Natal in the name of rebuilding the ANC with "viable branches and dignity for our people". This was a pattern of promoting senior leaders perceived to be progressive (or malleable) that became a Youth League hallmark.

Champion's opportunity came with Dube's retirement after a crippling stroke in 1944, leaving the ineffectual Rev Abner S Mtimkulu as acting president and heir apparent. The election on April 2, 1945, transpired in somewhat similar fashion to that of 1951, its procedures constitutionally compromised. When Mtimkulu belatedly tried to enforce strict delegate voting, Champion objected, demanding that all present should participate. Mtimkulu tried to adjourn, vacating the chair and leaving the hall. None other than Albert Luthuli took the platform as acting chairman and, with the support of Selby Msimang and Jordan Ngubane, Champion was elected. The three became members of Champion's executive committee, Msimang in the key post of provincial secretary, Luthuli for agriculture and Ngubane for youth. [11] Particularism, personal politics, insurgencies and loose

procedure were nothing new. Champion had risen in a strong tradition.

The relationship between Champion and Msimang was central to Champion's presidency. Msimang was a team player devoted to collegial leadership, highly intelligent and imaginative, given to large conceptions and schemes, and at times capable of surprisingly grandiloquent notions and rhetoric. The two worked closely, membership and branches grew, with attention not only to urban but especially to rural areas where Champion had strong connections with chiefs from ICU days. Indeed, his dependence on this network of influence stimulated the Zulu particularism that was a marked feature of his provincial leadership. It was the backbone of the ANC in Natal.

In early 1948 Champion helped Msimang win election to the Natives Representative Council from urban areas. He himself was a rural representative, as was Luthuli. The election featured a dispute with Luthuli over Champion's use of Congress in the election to unseat a non-Congress candidate. Luthuli wished to be mindful of the "boycott NRC" policy of the League and keep Congress out of the election. Msimang took the occasion to express adulatory support for Champion and deep suspicion of Luthuli. He urged that they use Congress all they could to consolidate their NRC positions and vice versa. Warning that Luthuli would eventually make a "bid for Natal leadership", Msimang - perhaps consciously playing to Champion's "liking for hero-worship", assured him that he would "remain a humble musket-bearer under your leadership for all time" and that he would soon offer him a grand plan of action. "My whole ambition is to see you rise in the scale of leadership so as to eclipse the late Dr Dube. Natal, through you, must lead South Africa ... You have it in you, Mahlathi, to do it ... IT LIES WITH US." [12]

Msimang's plan was a comprehensive economic development scheme that went far beyond the Congress National Fund proposed in various forms during these years to support action programmes. It would link chief, rural constituencies and the Zulu monarchy with Congress, solve its financial problems and combine all politics in one national movement. By 1949 it had taken the form of a projected Zulu National Development Corporation and Msimang was also manoeuvring to persuade his employers, the African Mutual Credit Association (AMCA) - a speculative subscription fund under white management (eventually convicted for fraud) - to invest in the corporation. Above all, the chiefs, always the main financial support of the Natal Congress, were supposed to be persuaded to sell "hundreds of thousands of cattle to provide us with ... millions ... [to] extricate ourselves from economic strangulation threatening our people ... I am banking entirely on your support." "The war between ourselves and the Government is an economic one ... that without adequate capital we cannot hope to win."

Thus did the entrepreneurial spirit stir Selby Msimang in the service of the nation, alarmed as he was at the National Party victory and the advancing menace of apartheid. It was a grand conception, but it asked too much. Chiefs balked, rural people doubted its practical use to them and were wary of any collection scheme, especially one that smacked of cattle culling. Champion, the pragmatist, and never one for visionary politics, seems to have viewed the scheme with a mixture of hope and scepticism. He understood the limitations of his constituency and advised Msimang that they suspected him and felt "he should first serve the urban Natives as their representative". Perhaps he was becoming alarmed at Msimang's energetic promotion as a challenge to his own pre-eminence. But he certainly emphasized the fund and touted it widely. It seems clear that he relied increasingly on Msimang's development idea as the basis of a strategy resting on the national alliance with chiefs and monarchy, that made sense to him, that would empower African leadership independently of other groups and could counter the rising influence and demands of the Youth League, which he considered not only presumptuous but dangerously premature. He began to refer to the fund as separate from Congress and not under its control. This was not a new idea, however. Even Luthuli had advised it in 1945. [13]

Msimang, meanwhile, had returned from the 1948 national conference enthused by the Youth League's draft Programme of Action. He saw the development scheme as quite compatible with it and bent his efforts to promoting the draft Programme in Natal. But by 1950 he was deeply frustrated. Congress was faltering. His annual report for 1949 spoke of a "disheartening" and "hopeless" situation, with organization deteriorating and branches in confusion, finances in permanent deficit, poor support from national headquarters, an "absence of militant policy" and "an absolute lack of teamwork" in the executive committee. This last situation led him to support Champion's hand-picked executive. [14]

Returning from the 1949 national conference where the Programme of Action was adopted as national Congress policy, Msimang plunged with redoubled energy into an effort to pull the factions of Natal together in 1950. His correspondence with Champion suggests that he was getting desperate, and even possibly a little delusive. Searching for a way out of Natal's stasis, he told Champion that the National Development Corporation could become the front for an "underground organisation" linking Champion with monarchy and chiefs in "a gigantic economic programme" that would protect the chiefs from overt political entanglement with Congress in the face of the impending Suppression of Communism Act, then before Parliament. One senses that he hoped this would induce Champion to go along with the Youth League with his rural base uncompromised. With the influence of Champion and Prince Cyprian, Msimang enthused, "we can raise three million pounds or more". Referring to Heaton Nicholls's book, *Bayete*, he went on to even more exciting prospects. "I am sure ... you cannot help but appreciate the amount of damage without spilling of blood we can do to upset the whole government structure of this country and seize power." Champion replied laconically, "I am glad you are now prepared to forget about cattle. Let us make a renewed effort to organise a big fund in 1950." [15]

But events were rapidly overtaking them as the new national leadership swung into play, intent on trials of the tactics of boycott, stay-at-home strikes, civil disobedience and non-African co-operation. In Natal, the simmering conflict between Champion and the Youth League came to a head in ever more acid exchanges. Msimang at last resolved to confront his dilemma. Champion had all along insisted that the Youth League must join as individuals, not *en bloc* as a separate body, for they would then become a Trojan horse. As the May Day demonstrations and Day of Protest approached, however, Msimang became convinced that they must "close ranks" in accordance with national policy, at "whatever cost". Between April and June he handed over membership cards *en bloc* to Youth League secretary M B Yengwa and negotiated elaborate terms of association which, he believed, would give Champion's "senior Congress" effective powers "to guide, control and encourage youth along sane lines". In June he reported all of this to Champion, probably with some trepidation. [16]

June was the watershed for Msimang and Champion. As already indicated, estrangement was also signalled by Msimang's assumption of leadership in the Day of Protest. Despite his own doubts about the wisdom and timing of it, this was an act of conscience as well as policy when Champion refused to co-operate without direct control of funds. Suddenly a bombshell struck Msimang. On 24 June, AMCA dismissed him from employment on grounds of incitement to break the law on the Day of Protest. He was staggered. A linchpin of his development scheme was gone. His appeal rejected, Msimang joined the ranks of the unemployed, among the one thousand who lost their jobs in Durban as a result of the strike. [17]

By August Champion and Msimang were at loggerheads and the break was virtually complete. Champion was relentlessly offended and unshakeably opposed to Msimang's policy, Msimang was determinedly going his way standing on principle. He now worked with the Youth League in attempts to develop Congress organization, including the disputed new branches in Durban. He wrote to Champion, evoking the memory of rivalry with Dube. "It is definitely inconsistent for you, of all persons, to do to Youth League what you would not allow

Dr Dube to do to you. You regarded Dr Dube's conduct ... as unnatural and unworthy of a national leader. Would it be right or even constitutional of me to support an unnational and unworthy attitude of a leader? ... I have followed my conscience in the light of a national cause in which we are both concerned to be my judge and monitor." [18]

Champion huffed: "Any leader who wishes to keep good balances [*sic*] must always act as I have done ... It becomes my duty not to be swayed by irresponsible tide [*sic*] of enthusiasm such as you seem to be a victim." And, finally, to the press, a characteristic expression of personal pique: "From June, 1950, the Congress leadership has been assumed by Mr Msimang ... The very intellectual I have introduced to many people in Natal and Zululand has turned against me." As we have seen, Msimang weathered the storm and was vindicated by re-election to the provincial secretaryship upon Champion's defeat. His own views, however, despite his opening to the Youth League, were not wholly in agreement with the developing strategy and tactics of the new leaders, particularly with the onset of the Defiance Campaign. In a way that seems to echo Champion's strictures about "balance" and "tides of enthusiasm": he publicly objected to the actions of the Joint Planning Council - a partnership arrangement with the South African Indian Congress - for "practically taking over the control and leadership of the African National Congress". He fully supported the 1949 Programme of Action, but opposed "any form of ultimatum being issued in an atmosphere of boisterousness and bunkum". Before the campaign began he resigned. [20]

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Notes

Key to abbreviations:

AJL	Albert J Luthuli
AWG	A W G Champion
MWS	Author's collection
C-K	Carter-Karis collection
HSM	Henry Selby Msimang
ILN	<i>Ilanga Lase Natal</i>
TK	Thomas Karis

- 1 AWG notes for agenda and procedure (trans): MWS. HSM, Notice of the meeting (trans), 14 May 1951: MWS.
- 2 HSM to AWG, 10 June 1950; AWG to HSM, 17 August 1950; AWG to JS Moroka, 28 October 1950: C-K.
- 3 AWG article in ILN, 20 January 1951; AWG Presidential Address, 26 January 1951: MWS. Minutes of Special Meeting of Executive Committee, 27 January 1951: C-K.
- 4 AJL to AWG (trans), 18 January 1950; HSM to AWG, 31 January 1950: MWS.
- 5 "The Annual Meeting of the ANC", ILN, 16 June 1951 (trans): MWS.
- 6 Interview by G M Carter, Durban, 28 March 1964: C-K.

- 7 AWG to Editor ILN, 4 June 1951; draft letter to Editor *Guardian*, n.d.; draft article, "Thank You", n.d.: C-K.
- 8 Interview, MWS of H J Bhengu, Durban, 8 November 1974: MWS
- 9 AWG to Editor ILN, 4 June 1951; AWG, "The Words of the Former President of the ANC" (trans), n.d.: MWS.
- 10 Interview, TK of AWG, Durban, 25 March 1964: C-K.
- 11 ILN 13 & 20 February 1943: MWS. AWG, speech to Educated Africans Conference, "Words of the Wise": C-K. Kumalo to AWG, 6 April 1945; AWG frags, n.d.; AJL to AWG, 20 April 1945; AWG notes on meeting with Zuma, 9 May 1945: C-K. AWG, "When Will Dr J L Dube be Healthy Again?" 19 May 1944; Mtinkulu letters to editors (trans), n.d.: MWS. AJL, *Let My People Go* (1962), pp 99-100.
- 12 AJL to AWG, 20 March 1948; AWG to AJL, 23 March 1948: C-K.
- 13 AWG and HSM to "Fellow Countrymen", n.d.: C-K. HSM to A A Hay (AMCA), 23 August 1948; Draft Constitution of Zulu National Development Corporation, n.d.; HSM, "The National Fund", 1949; HSM to AWG, 16 January 1949; Argyle collection, University of Natal. HSM to AWG, 17 January 1949; HSM circular, 18 January 1949; HSM to AWG, 14 November 1949; AWG to HSM, 19 November 1949; AWG Presidential address to ANC, Natal, 26 November 1949; AWG to HSM, 3 December 1949: C-K.
- 14 HSM, Natal Province Annual Report, 9 December 1949: C-K. AJL to AWG, 18 January 1950; HSM to AWG, 31 January 1950: C-K; AWG to AJL, 26 January 1950; AWG, "The Congress", n.d.: MWS.
- 15 HSM to AWG, 18 January 1950; AWG to HSM, 26 January 1950; HSM, 31 January 1950; AWG to Moroka, 4 April 1950: C-K. AWG, "The Congress", n.d.: MWS.
- 16 AWG notes on notice of mass meeting; M B Yengwa, "The Youth League and Its Aims" (trans), ILN, 6 May 1950; "Who Really Fought the Pass Campaign?" *Inkundla ya Bantu*, 20 May 1950: MWS. HSM to AWG, enclosures, 10 June 1950: C-K.
- 17 HSM to AWG, 4 June 1950; HSM to A W Turner, 5 May 1950; B Jackson to HSM, 24 June 1950; HSM to AWG, 29 June 1950: C-K.
- 18 HSM to AWG, 14 September 1950: C-K.
- 19 AWG to HSM, 27 October 1950; AWG, draft article, "The African National Congress Youth League", n.d.: C-K.
- 20 Thomas Karis, *Hope and Challenge 1935-1952, Vol 2, From Protest to Challenge. A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964* (Stanford, 1973), p 413.