

**Memorial Lecture in Honour of the Former Chief Whip of the Official Opposition,
African National Congress - The Late Themba Harry Gwala**

Presented by Former Speaker and Former Premier Willies Mchunu



KZN Legislature Complex

15 December 2020

**Address by Former Speaker of the Legislature and Former Premier of the
Province of KwaZulu-Natal Mr Willies Mchunu**

Memorial Lecture of Cde Harry Gwala: KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Legislature

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Madam Speaker Honourable NN Boyce;
Deputy Speaker Themba Mthembu;
Chief Whip Honourable BM Zuma;
Premier of KwaZulu-Natal Sihle Zikalala;
Colleagues in the Executive;
Provincial ANC Sectary Mdumseni Ntuli;
Leader of the Official Opposition – the Inkatha Freedom Party Honourable Velenkosi Hlabisa;
Honourable members of the Legislature;
Member of the National Assembly Cyril Xaba;
Chair of Harry Gwala Foundation MEC Panyaza Lesufi;
The entire Gwala Family;
Academics
Fellow Citizens who are streaming live in various social media platforms;
Members of the Media Present;

First and foremost, allow me Madam Speaker, to extend words of appreciation to you and Honourable Members.

I am privileged and honoured to be invited to reflect on the legacy of The Lion of the Midlands.

We are gathered today to reflect on the recipient of Isitwalandwe. This is highest honour bestowed on him in January 8, 1992 for his dedication, service and selfless commitment to the struggle against apartheid.

Honourable members and viewers at home, I wish to point out that it is not an easy task to eloquently articulate various responsibilities that Umtomdala, as he was affectionately known, fulfilled. He was a Communist at heart - and joined the South African Community Party before fighting for freedom under the banner of the ANC.

The apartheid masters never imagined that today we would stand here and talk freely about an activist they once listed under the Suppression of Communism Act in 1952 and banned for two years.

Despite the harassment and banning orders, Cde Harry Gwala remained fearless. He is credited for, amongst others, the success of a national stay-away of workers in 1950.

This is the strike that sent shivers down the spine of the then Prime Minister of the apartheid government.

Honoured Guests, a few books have been written that capture some of the many aspects of the life of Cde Harry Gwala.

Despite this, we wish to urge the leadership of the legislature to continue to work with the Harry Gwala Foundation to expose the youth and society at large, to the phenomenal leadership of The Lion of the Midlands.

This is the leader, who touched the lives of many people at their very core throughout his life.

To the apartheid government – he was a terrorist that had to be taken out in order to limit the spread of communism and socialism influence. It is for these reasons that they celebrated in the 1980s when a motor neuron disease robbed him of the use of his arms.

His disability did not deter him from working for the cause. He continued to inspire many people in the struggle for freedom and democracy

Consequently, to the multitudes of people, Cde Harry Gwala was a symbol of resistance. He was a bridge that shortened the distance between oppression and freedom.

Madam Speaker, what does Cde Harry Gwala represent to the SACP and the African National Congress, the party in charge of the government of the day?

Some of the things that immediately come to mind when one thinks about Harry Gwala are the following:

- Discipline in thought and in action;
- Fidelity to principle;
- Fearlessness and foresight.
- A humble servant and a leader of the masses of our people;
- An empowering leader;
- A political educator, a commander and commissar;
- A persuader and diplomat par excellence;
- A leader with the ability to give and also take advice.

More importantly, he drew strength from other comrades. We can mention Comrades such as Archie Gumede, A. S. Chetty, Chota Motala and D. C. O. Matiwane.

He worked with these distinguished leaders in organising the Midlands delegation to Kliptown for the Congress of the People in 1955, as well as the All-in-Africa Conference in Pietermaritzburg in 1962.

The latter event took place in a hall which stands even today in what is now known as Imbali Township, and was the occasion of the last 'public' speech of 'The Black Pimpernel', Comrade Nelson Mandela, before his arrest, outside Howick, in August 1962.

I may as well point out that Mphephethe worked with many other experienced and mature leaders of the Tripartite Alliance. I am referring to the leaders such as Cde Mfenendala Xaba, Cde Ntela Sikhosana, Cde A.K Rassol, Cde Mzwakhe Sithebe, Cde Mangethe Zwane, Cde Gaba Makhathini, Cde Chris Hani, Cde Winnie Mandela, OR Tambo, Former President Thabo Mbeki, former President JG Zuma and many others who played a pivotal role in the fight against apartheid.

He was a great political teacher who taught generation after generation. He became known for his teachings at Robben Island, which was often referred to as our university. He introduced members of the younger generation to Marxist theory and communism.

He was also an ardent and strident theorist who believed that everything could be explained in theoretical terms.

We are informed that at Robben Island he used the Bible - the only book provided - to teach communism. He loved history, both local and international, and hardly ever answered any questions without referring to history.

Appreciation to the Gwala Family

Honourable Members, at this stage, allow me to pause and express our deepest appreciation to the entire Harry Gwala Family.

We do recall that on the 4th of August 2017, we were allowed by the family to lead a series of activities in honour of this giant of our people.

On the 6th of August 2017, we witnessed the unveiling of the Statue of Umtomdala by former President JG Zuma, at the Harry Gwala Stadium.

We cherished, with humility, the opportunity to fulfill such a huge responsibility on behalf of the alliance and the ANC-led government.

We never took for granted such an honour bestowed on us by the family because Cde Harry Gwala was a loving husband, a father, an uncle and a brother who had deep love for his family.

We remember very well that Cde Harry Gwala was in prison when his wife, Mama Eida, passed away. It was indeed with a great sense of disbelief, shock and sadness that we received the news that Umama wethu was no more. The saddest part is that her husband, Cde Harry Gwala was not allowed to attend her funeral.

Honourable Members, honoured guests and viewers at home, the sad passing of Mama Elda, and the apartheid government's decision not to allow Cde Harry Gwala to pay his last respect to his dear wife, is something that we don't often talk about.

This was the most systematic brutality and cruel form of silencing and weakening Cde Harry Gwala. This barbaric decision left unbearable pain to the family, relatives, the leadership of the alliance and general membership.

Whilst Cde Harry Gwala endured the pain, he was quickly comforted by the ANC, SAPC activists and all progressive forces who paid visits to the family to mourn and share our common grief.

But how does anyone say 'Farewell' in absentia to the wife that spent her life supporting the leader of the ANC who had some many responsibilities over the years? - Virtually being the pillar of his very strength.

It is only fitting that at this point, on behalf of the ANC, the Alliance and this house, we must say Big Salute, albeit posthumously, to Mama Elda for her revolutionary loyalty and dedication to the family and the struggle for our liberation.

May her Soul Rest in Peace!!!!

Amandla!!!

Long Live the Spirit of Mam Elda Long Live!!!

So, here we are, all; family, friends, colleagues and comrades; united in paying tribute to your Husband Cde Harry Gwala.

We thank the Harry Gwala Foundation under the leadership of Cde Panyaza Lesufi for preserving the legacy of the Lion of the Midlands.

I have no doubt that members of this House are in support of efforts to declare the Grave of Cde Harry Gwala, a National Heritage Site.

Cde Harry Gwala always suspicious of apartheid government

Honoured Guests and viewers at home, when the last President of apartheid South Africa F.W De Klerk announced the unbanning of political parties such as the ANC, SACP, PAC and other liberation organisations, Cde Harry Gwala remained suspicious.

We all remember that he was even suspicious of the CODESA negotiation process. Like Cde Chris Hani, he was vehemently opposed to the manner in which the armed struggle was suspended, at times seeming to oppose its suspension.

His mistrust of the National Party is well documented. He analyzed every statement by ministers under apartheid government including every pronouncement by the National Party leaders.

He was concerned about what he described as a soft approach of the ANC leadership towards negotiations. His concerns were based on the fact that he wanted a total liberation of the indigenous people – the oppressed and the downtrodden.

In his criticism, he often pointed out the unfortunate distance between negotiators and the masses.

He was also adamant that although voting was important, elected public representatives needed to realize that it was incorrect to expect the people of this country to eat votes.

He argued that voting had to be accompanied by economic freedom.

He was opposed to the sunset clause of the Interim Constitution which allowed the apartheid civil service to be retained for the first five years of democracy at least.

In this he clashed with Comrade Joe Slovo, then the SACP Chairperson, who was one of the key proponents of the “sunset clauses”.

Political Violence and Cde Harry Gwala as a father to the families of victims

Honoured Guests and Honourable Members, I won't be doing justice to this important memorial lecture if I do not talk about political violence that started in KwaZulu-Natal in 1983, with the formation of the United Front.

We recall that upon his release from Robben Island in 1988, he found political related violence ravaging this province and displacing many communities including the youth.

Thousands of young people sought refuge in his house and he welcomed them because he believed in the youth as far back as in 1976.

He was himself very inspired by the youth whom he saw as determined revolutionaries and a major ally of the working class.

He mobilized them to use their energy and militancy to sustain the fight against the apartheid regime.

Those who worked closely with him, will remember that he seemed to believe in endless mass struggles and had a marked impatience with meetings, except if they were political education classes.

He often told us in meetings that the unbanning of political parties did not mean peaceful acceptance of our struggle for freedom. He contextualized his point by saying

the political third-force inspired political violence meant that democracy would continue to be challenged by forces opposed to our cause at all times.

Indeed, violence escalated here in Pietermaritzburg prompting Mphephethe to express his concerns that the third force was behind the black-on-black violence.

Cde Harry Gwala was vindicated when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission received testimonies from police who served under the apartheid government. They admitted at being behind the violence between the United Democratic Front and the ANC vs Inkatha Freedom Party.

It was during this period that Cde Harry Gwala showed that he was indeed the Man-of-the-People. He worked tirelessly assisting people who were displaced by political violence.

It is for these reasons that, amongst others in 2010, the government posthumously awarded Comrade Harry Gwala with the Order of Mendi for Bravery in Gold for “displaying enormous courage and bravery.

There were more than 14 000 people, women and children from Mpumuza, Mafunze, Inadi, Imbali and Sobantu who were affected by the violence of that time. Many lost their families and had their houses burnt down.

Some of the people were accommodated at the Mason Mill refugee camp in Table Mountain, while many others were accommodated in churches by revolutionary church leaders.

Cde Harry Gwala became their father during the most traumatic period often counselling them and assuring that one day there would be peace and stability. The enemies of the ANC went to an extent of creating violence between AMaphumulo and AmaNyavu clans using land as source of conflict. They were also conflicts fueled between AmaNyavu and Mlaba clans.

It was clear that hostile overt and covert forces of darkness were at play.

The Seven-Days-War which broke out on the 25th March 1990 left many people dead and many others homeless.

I recall that on the 31st March about 14 people were killed and Inkosi Mhlabunzima Maphumulo's house which was also burnt down. This happened whilst Inkosi Mhlabunzima was abroad in Geneva where he had gone to further his work of promoting peace and reconciliation.

Inkosi Maphumulo, was the founding President of CONTRALESA, the organisation he joined in 1989. He was instrumental in the drafting of the constitution of CONTRALESA and he prioritized the grievances faced by Amakhosi and their people.

Cde Harry Gwala worked with Inkosi Mhlabunzima Maphumulo. They both believed that CONTRALESA had to be used as a tool to effectively promote peace and stability.

Inkosi Maphumulo organized petition which was sent to the apartheid masters calling them to set up a commission of inquiry to investigate murder of innocent people during political violence in Pietermaritzburg. He worked very closely with Cde Harry Gwala whose deep love for the people remains legendary.

It was befitting that at his funeral in 1995, President Nelson Mandela, in his address said: *'Mphephethwa was brave and blunt in dealing with the defenders of apartheid. But he was equally honest and blunt in raising issues within the ranks of the liberation movement. You would know where Mphephethwa stood on any question. No one was to him beyond reproach. Personally I was fortunate to cross swords with him on many an issue, both in prison and outside. I would naturally insist that I was right; as Harry would definitely insist that he too was right'*.

This memorial lecture in these premises should be a source of inspiration

Honourable Members, Honoured Guests and Fellow South Africans - our presence here today, is a good gesture of respect to the Gwala Family. We pay tribute to the ANC and the SACP - the parties he served with loyalty until his last days.

I have no doubt that we are all rejuvenated to be in these premises in which one of the giants of our liberation struggle once worked. He spent his entire life in pursuit of a dream to free his people from the yoke of oppression.

Today we have come here to re-enact the journey that Cde Harry Gwala took, in 1994, as we, ourselves, continue with the fight for another form of struggle. We are referring to the fight for economic freedom.

Cde Harry Gwala's principles, teachings and values must continue to be the guiding light of our movement long after he joined a glittering array of other icons and activists who left us.

The legacy of Cde Harry Gwala belongs to all of us and those who continue to participate in the struggle to build a society characterized by unity, democracy, peace, prosperity, equality, social cohesion and stability.

While the ANC occupied the vanguard role on the forward trenches of the liberation struggle of our people, the reality is that the freedom was brought about by a collective swell of all the progressive forces working in concert to achieve one goal.

Members of the Legislature must remember Cde Harry Gwala as they discharge their duties

Honourable Members, the greatest fight that you must mount - is the fight for economic freedom for our people.

As members of this house you must remember that you are a product of democratic process which Cde Harry Gwala spent his entire life fighting for.

As you discharge your duties in different portfolio committees you must remember that you represent the aspirations of the electorate – not your individual interests.

COVID-19 pandemic has brought the economy to a standstill and inflicted untold sufferings to millions of people in this province. Rating agencies, economists, commentators and financial institutions have given different guess-estimates on the impact of COVID-19.

During this difficult period, the people of KwaZulu-Natal are looking up to you to provide leadership.

Cde Harry Gwala's time in the Legislature

Honourable Members and Honoured Guests, I joined this House with Cde Harry Gwala in 1994 as part of the first batch of public representatives who were pioneers of what a post-apartheid parliament would be like.

It was a different province - ravaged by violence and smitten with hostility and bitterness especially between ANC and IFP.

The first Speaker of this House, GS Mdlalose had tough time containing the often unruly legislators who often disregarded his authority and exchanged in verbal exchanges not fit to be repeated in such an august house.

We must pay tribute to two leaders who led us in this House, Dr F T Mdlalose, the former Chairman of IFP and First Premier and President JG Zuma, who was MEC for Economic Development and Tourism at that time but also a Provincial Chair of the ANC.

They led bilateral meetings and calmed down a lot of conflict and brought sanity.

Through various peace initiatives and bilateral meetings between ANC and IFP the atmosphere of political intolerance was transformed to create a new spirit of open but peaceful competition and cooperation.

Most of you we recall that in 1994, Cde Harry Gwala was nominated as a provincial member of the KwaZulu-Natal legislature. He served as the first Chief Whip of the official opposition in this House, the African National Congress.

Cde Harry Gwala was principled man who never changed his decisions purely on the basis of narrow personal interests.

As a matter of principle, Babu Gwala never attended any sitting of the legislature in Ulundi despite being the Chief Whip of the ANC. His reluctance also coincided with his state of health, which made it impossible for him to attend the meeting of the legislature as per the doctor's instruction. He allowed Cde Ina Cronje, who was his deputy, to play the role of ANC Chief Whip.

Cde Harry Gwala in the face of COVID-19

Honourable Members, can we pause and imagine what would have Cde Harry Gwala said today in the face of COVID-19 and other challenges such as economic crisis.

He would urge all of us to pursue the course of the greatest unity of democratic forces, especially the Revolutionary Alliance.

He would require of us to deny ourselves and not scramble for material satisfaction while so many suffer of hunger and unemployment.

He would not just moralize and criticize from the side-lines but he would be in the trenches with the lowliest among us as to him all lives are equal. These would be and are his injunctions to us today.

Had Cde Harry Gwala lived long, he would have argued for the deployment of all resources for the benefit of emerging entrepreneurs who remain marginalized economically.

He would have called on Provincial Treasury as a custodian of procurement to work with all government departments and municipalities to use procurement to drive the entrepreneurship revolution.

As a unionist, Cde Harry Gwala would have been concerned about job losses in different sectors of the economy.

He would have encouraged massive investment in infrastructure by government in order to shield our province from the worse impact of COVID-19.

He would have supported the Radical Socio-Economic Transformation and insisted that more should be done by the government of the people to support informal traders and hawkers.

As a firm believer in socialism, he would have called on government to intervene and ensure that support is offered to the workers in the informal economy - especially, the Co-operatives.

Honourable Members, during lockdown, we witnessed many workers complaining about employers who failed and refused to ensure that they accessed the national Temporary Relief Schemes.

He would have declared this as the worst form of corruption and termed it as the manifestation of capitalism. He would have called on law enforcement agencies to live no stone unturned in the fight against private sector corruption.

As former worker at Dunlop, he would have ensured that government did more to mitigate the impact of the national lockdown on workers.

Cde Harry Gwala would have been participating robustly on the issue of the Nationalization of the Reserve Bank.

He would have rejected the Reserve Bank in its current form. He would have also campaigned for its nationalization and transformation towards serving the people of South Africa, especially the marginalized.

In addition, he would have continued with the fight against land dispossession and would have pursued a vigorous campaign for land repossession by African people.

He would have been very irritated by African people who are campaigning against hearings to amend Section 25 to allow for the expropriation of land without compensation.

In contextualizing the lack of understanding of our history around land dispossession, he would have used the African proverb: "A people without knowledge of their roots are like a tree without their roots."

He would have emphasized in all public platforms that land repossession is about ensuring access to land, the ownership of land and the creation of wealth for the majority of South Africans.

He would have argued strongly that land still represents a huge percent of all the wealth in the economy. In this regard, he would have been in support of the suggestion that if you are a landlord, you get a rent every month, just like stockholders receive quarterly dividends.

In addition, he would have been in agreement with another argument that suggests that, in the same way that a stockholder can use dividends to buy more shares, a landlord can use rental income to buy more property.

Importantly, he believed that the working class must own the means of production and should have equal claim to the wealth of this country.

He would have supported the agrarian revolution and programmes such as One Home One Garden, as a means of attacking poverty that afflict mainly, the indigenous people of this country.

He would have also urged government to pursue vigorously a programme focused on the assisting emerging farmers and ensure that they are involved in the entire value chain of agriculture. He would have said, in order to realize this, access to the land remains critical.

As an educator, he would have tirelessly worked very closely with stakeholders in the education sector to champion the use of innovative means to ensure access to quality education for the black child.

Honourable Members, Cde Harry Gwala would have created a support base of all community leaders and civil society to rally behind School Governing Bodies, teachers and learners for the improvement of quality of education and outcomes.

Having once worked at Edendale Hospital, he would have supported healthcare workers and all health professionals who are fighting the outbreak of COVID-19. He would have insisted that more resources should be deployed to protect healthcare workers who are at the coalface of the war against COVID-19.

He would have expressed his public disapproval to any form of corruption, including the one associated with PPEs - in any sphere of government.

Most of all, he would have called on you as Members of this House to play your oversight role and ensure that the executive is held accountable and that it delivers on its mandate.

He would have encouraged a robust debate and a climate of co-existence of political parties and society.

He would have insisted that whilst robust debate is essential to the democratic process, you must acknowledged that as members of this house you should seek to address the needs of society.

He would have fought against political intolerance by different party leaders. And fought for political co-existence and social cohesion.

He would have urged all members of this house to work together to champion the government's agenda of fighting poverty, unemployment, crime, corruption and inequality.

In conclusion

Honourable Members and Honoured Guests, I wish to conclude by once again expressing my appreciation to the Speaker for the invitation and opportunity afforded to me to once again stand in this house and address members.

I must also appreciate members for having agreed to this lecture on one of the stalwarts of our country – Cde Harry Gwala.

My sincere appreciation to the leadership of the ANC as well as leadership of SACP for relentlessly pursuing the ideals that our leaders like Cde Harry Gwala wanted us to pursue.

I leave this podium with a deep sense of humility, pride and appreciation to the former and present members of this house for the support I was afforded. Firstly – firstly whilst I was Deputy Speaker and secondly when I was speaker of this house.

I particular want to single out the first Speaker of this Legislature uBaba Gideon Mdlalose for his unwavering support to make me a competent speaker of this legislature.

I came here not knowing anything about the work of being Deputy Speaker or even of being Speaker, but he supported me.

May his soul rest in peace.

Through the support, I received from all members of this house, I succeeded in making my humble contribution to ensure that this legislature fully served the people of KwaZulu-Natal.

Without the struggle and sacrifices of leaders such as Cde Harry Gwala, our generation would not have been the first ones to enjoy the first fruits of liberation.

Long Live the spirit of Cde Harry Gwala !!!

Long Live the undying of Cade Harry Gwala !!!

Amandla !!!