

# The FREEDOM CHARTER

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2005 celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Freedom Charter by the Congress of the People at Kliptown in June 1955.

We all have dreams of Utopia, where all our needs are met and even some of our wants can be achieved, a society, where all can live in peace and harmony, able to reap the rewards of our labour. We usually shrug this off as a pipe dream - impossible to achieve. A pipe dream, perhaps, but this did not prevent people from dreaming of a better life, a time when all the peoples of this country could enjoy equal rights and freedom.

It was at the Annual Congress of the African National Congress (ANC), held in Queenstown in August 1953 that Professor ZK Matthews proposed that a Congress of the People be convened to draw up a Freedom Charter, which would serve as a blue print for the type of democratic society desired for all South Africans. The National Conference of the ANC approved the proposal in December 1953. A Joint Action Committee comprising the ANC, the South African Indian Congress, the Coloured People's Organisation and the Congress of Democrats, was formed to co-sponsor the Congress.

Leaflets were drawn up and widely distributed, calling on all 'good men and true' to join in the Congress of the People and to 'write their own demands into the Freedom Charter'. Meetings were held in factories, churches, on farms, in homes and even at bus stops - wherever people gathered. People came together in groups, both large and small, to elect representatives to the Congress of the People and to make known their demands for the Freedom Charter. Volunteers were enlisted by

the National Action Council to collect the demands from the various groups and to pass them on to the Congress Commission. The volunteers were expressly instructed not to write down the demands on behalf of the groups, but to get the people to speak for themselves.

All the while, a Congress Commission sifted through the thousands of pieces of paper containing the demands received from the groups. Their task was to read, classify, index and group all the demands, to be incorporated into one cohesive document - The Freedom Charter.

On 25 and 26 June 1955, the Congress of the People, sponsored by the African National Congress of South Africa, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured People's Organisation and the Congress of Democrats, convened at Kliptown. Attended by over 2 800 delegates from all over the country, who had travelled in trains, in buses and on foot, the task of the Congress was to adopt the Freedom Charter for the democratic South Africa of the future. For the first time the people were involved in formulating a

vision of the democratic society they wanted.

(A complete transcript of the Freedom Charter can be found on various web sites - see below.)

The Freedom Charter pledged to continue the fight for these freedoms 'until we have won our liberty'.

Not everyone, however, was satisfied with the Freedom Charter. By the late 1950s some of the ANC members, who were opposed to a multi-racial future for the country, broke away from the ANC and formed the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

The response to the Freedom Charter by the government of the day, resulted in the arrest of 156 people in 1956, charged with high treason and conspiracy to overthrow the government. The accused included Chief Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. The Treason Trial comprised two stages - a preparatory phase in a magistrate's court to determine whether there was sufficient evidence to support the charges, and if the evidence existed, a trial in the Supreme Court. After the initial phase of the trial, charges against 61 of the accused

were dropped. Charges were made against ninety-five people and the Treason Trial proper started on 3 August 1958. Just two months after the start of the trial, charges were dropped. A new indictment was issued against 30 of the accused, including Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. On 29 March 1961, Justice FL Rumpff declared the verdict that the Crown had failed to establish any revolutionary intent and found the accused not guilty of the charges.

It was during the period of the Treason Trial that the ANC and PAC were declared illegal under the Suppression of Communism Act.

The Freedom Charter became a

## **The Freedom Charter declared that**

***South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people***

***The people shall govern***

***All national groups shall have equal rights***

***The people shall share in the country's wealth***

***The land shall be shared among those who work it***

***All shall be equal before the law***

***All shall enjoy equal human rights***

***There shall be work and security***

***The doors of learning and culture shall be opened***

***There shall be houses, security and comfort***

***There shall be peace and friendship.***

force in uniting peoples of all racial origins in a common struggle to eliminate apartheid and bring about a non-racial democratic South Africa.

The Freedom Charter has spread its influence far and wide. It has been used as a guideline by other countries and organisations around the world in drawing up their own Freedom Charters. In January 2004, Sinn Féin published the Irish Freedom Charter in which they set out the principles for the type of society that they envisage for Ireland. Just as the Freedom Charter had done in 1955, Sinn Féin hoped that their document would stimulate debate and provide feedback from individuals and organisations.

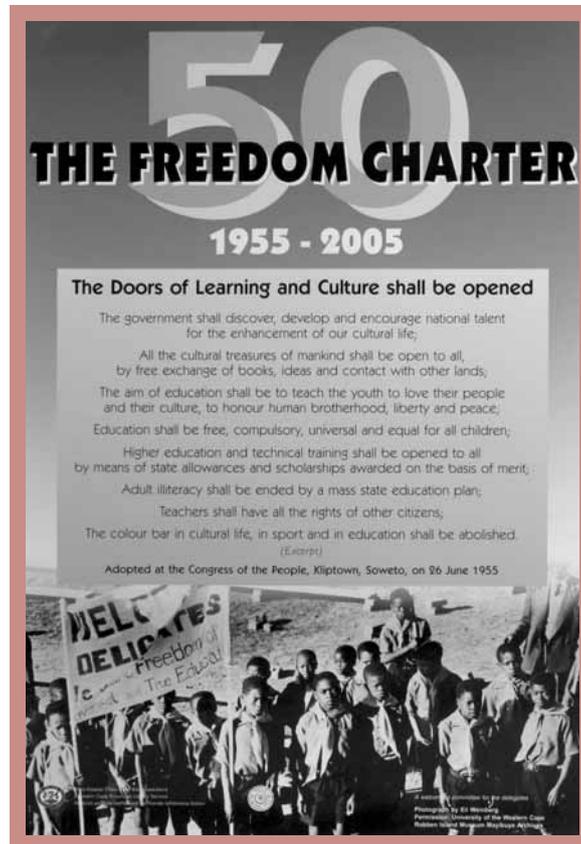
With many of its principles entrenched in the Constitution of South Africa, the Freedom Charter remains as relevant today as it did fifty years ago. In the traditional January 8th statement to celebrate the founding day of the ANC, President Thabo Mbeki pointed out that the 'vision it spells out has not lost its relevance' and referred to it as a 'living document', which should continue to play 'its role in the formation of the New South Africa'.

In compiling this short history of the Freedom Charter, I found the following web sites to be most useful:

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/charter.html> - contains a transcript of the Freedom Charter.

<http://jscnc.ukzn.ac.za/doc/HIST/freedom-chart/freedomch.html> - contains a transcript of the Freedom Charter, including some background regarding the Congress of the People.

<http://www.gpg.gov.za/publications/freedomcharter.html> - contains a transcript of the Freedom Charter, as well as information on the Kliptown renewal project and the relevance of the Freedom Charter today.



<http://www.africanhistory.about.com> - type the keywords 'Freedom Charter' in the SEARCH box to find articles on the Freedom Charter, Congress Alliance, Treason Trial and the Sharpeville massacre.

<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/special-projects/june26/charter.html> - there are links to the Freedom Charter Campaign, planning the Congress of the People, the adoption of the Freedom Charter and other useful information.

<http://www.marxist.com/LessonsOfThe1950s/05.html> - Publication **Lessons of the 1950s** by Richard Monroe, which includes chapters on the Freedom Charter and Sharpeville.

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/campaigns/cop/index.html> - a really interesting web site with links to a number of documents, including a copy of the leaflet handed out to call on the people to participate in the Congress of the People; a list of the demands made by women, and various other articles.

<http://www.saembassy.org/> - select 'News & Events' and then click on 'Letter from the

President'. Scroll down and click on 'Previous letters', then select 'Freedom Charter bakhala ngayo amazweni!' You can read the letter sent by President Thabo Mbeki on Founding Day to mark the 93rd anniversary of the ANC.

For information on the Treason Trial and the Sharpeville massacre you can try the following web sites:

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/trials/> - articles covering the Treason Trial 1956 - 1961 and the Rivonia Trial 1963-1964, as well as associated links.

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/misc/shareve.html> - article by The Right Reverend Ambrose Reeves, **The Sharpeville massacre - a watershed in South Africa.**

<http://www.answers.com/topic/sharpeville-massacre> - contains an article on the Sharpeville massacre and other links.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia/761584110/Sharpeville\\_Massacre.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia/761584110/Sharpeville_Massacre.html) - contains an article on the Sharpeville massacre, as well as links to 'pass laws'.

There are many really interesting web sites containing documents and articles, which you might find useful. Just use your favourite search engine and type in the keywords: 'freedom charter', or the keywords for any of the related topics, and let the Web take you where it will. Explore the links and learn more about our history.

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