

Nozizwe

## Speaking Truth to Power

by Diane Salters

*The following piece was written by ITAA trustee and South Africa conference co-chair Diane Salters after conference opening speaker Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge was dismissed as the South African Deputy Health Minister by SA President Thabo Mbeki in August 2007. Madlala-Routledge, a member of the South Africa Parliament and of the African National Congress, was apparently dismissed because of her well-known efforts to help combat AIDS in South Africa, to resist denial by the government of the severity of the epidemic, and to confront the reluctance to provide anti-retroviral treatment for HIV positive people. The crunch came when she gave an interview to the press about high child mortality rates in an Eastern Cape hospital and described it as “a national emergency”. During the era of apartheid, Madlala-Routledge was actively engaged in the struggle (with the United Democratic Front) and spent time in prison. More recently, as well as serving in parliament, she has been actively promoting gender reconciliation workshops in South Africa with William Keepin and Cynthia Brix. The original version of the following piece was published as an editorial comment in the 20 November edition of The Cape Times. Our thanks to Diane for her permission to republish it here.*

Every now and then a particular phrase captures the public imagination and seems to express something important that needs saying. Since Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge used the phrase “speak truth to power” after her dismissal by South African President Thabo Mbeki in August 2007, it has been cropping up in editorials, letter columns, and even recently in an advertisement for Andrew Feinstein’s book *After The Party*.

Yet not everyone uses it to mean the same thing. In his response to Madlala-Routledge, President Mbeki interpreted this phrase as a sort of plea for protection, a claim to the right to speak out under the freedom of the press. Yet this phrase has a history with which our president seems unfamiliar. This phrase is no plea for protection. In its original usage, it is a declaration of willingness to speak one’s truth and stand defenseless in the winds that then may blow from the corridors of power.

Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge is a Quaker. In other words, she is a member of the Religious Society of Friends, known since the seventeenth century as Quakers. As a Quaker myself, I recognized that in using this phrase, Madlala-Routledge was drawing on a well-established Quaker tradition, one that calls on us to speak out with integrity regardless of powerful injunctions from party, state, or society to remain silent. Edward Said, the Palestinian intellectual whom Feinstein quotes in his book, attended the Quaker school in Ramallah and not only used this phrase in his writing but made it a central tenet of his life. So where did it come from originally?

The phrase can be dated with some certainty from an influential tract published by an American Quaker committee in 1954 entitled *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence*. When some of the committee were, much later, asked where the phrase came from, they replied that it must have been from one of the early Quaker teachers. This would seem likely since the early Quakers repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to risk all by speaking their truth. In the seventeenth century, the Quakers suffered considerable persecution. Indeed, one of the questions early meetings were asked to respond to in their annual reports was, “What Friends, imprisoned for their testimony, have died in prison since the last yearly meeting?” Since then, many have risked their freedom in opposing slavery, war, and other forms of persecution.

So, naturally, it might be assumed that the elders of the Quaker movement must have used this phrase. But had they? One panel in the “Quaker Tapestry” depicting the history of Quakerism depicts the delegation to the Tsar of Russia in 1854 asking him to help avert war in the Crimea. It has the words “speak truth to power” beneath it, but the tapestry was only commenced in 1982, and the makers may have embroidered the history a little.

Research on this question has thrown up no early use of the phrase in Quaker literature, so where did that 1954 tract get the phrase? One of the committee members, Milton Mayer, was of Jewish background; perhaps it had come from Jewish writings? No such exact form of words was found. Maybe it came from Robert Burns, or Confucius, both of

whom said similar things? But no connections could be established between them and the committee. The nearest match was found when it was recalled that one of the members, Bayard Rustin, was interested in the teachings of Islam. In a hadith in the *Mishkat Collection: Book of Rulership and Judgment* it is recorded that Mohammed said “The most excellent jihad is when one speaks a true word in the presence of a tyrannical ruler.”

Possibly drawing on this teaching, and certainly drawing on the early example of Quakers, Rustin had in 1942 written to his fellow Quakers in Manhattan: “The primary social function of a religious society is to ‘speak the truth to power.’ ”

Ironically, although he was an influential member of the American Friends Service Committee, Rustin’s name does not appear on the 1954 tract. It was withheld at his request because, as a homosexual, he was facing a possible criminal charge—the law being what it was at the time—and he was concerned that this might compromise the work of the committee.

So it seems that this phrase, so well loved today by Quakers the world over, comes not directly from our early founders but from a gay, black American with an interest in Islam—a wonderfully diverse origin that makes the phrase all the more suitable for South African use.

It is worth noting that Rustin, a remarkable man, was also active and influential in the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., but, there too, he kept himself in the background to protect the movement. At that time, some truths were still too difficult for the civil rights movement as a whole to speak.

Similarly, now, it seems, there are some truths that the South African liberation movement does not dare to speak, and those individuals (public servants and elected representatives) who decided to “speak truth to power” are paying the price of loss of career, status, and acceptance. This is doubly sad because we have such a rich tradition in this country of people willing to “speak truth to power.” Nor were they simply risking their careers. They, like the early Quakers, were risking their liberty and their lives. Indeed, many of our parliamentarians are there because they took such risks. Why their silence now?

Perhaps there is a big difference between speaking “truth to power” when you stand outside the circle of power and when you stand inside it. Only a handful of white people found the integrity and courage to “speak truth to power” under apartheid. One’s group and the protection it confers is no easy thing to give up. To speak truth to the power of the other is one thing; to speak truth to one’s own power source in another.

We have three Nobel Peace Prize winners in South Africa who exhibited a remarkable capacity to “speak truth to power”: Albert Luthuli, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Nelson Mandela. We have a fourth, F. W. de Klerk, and personally I have always wondered why he received the award. I think I now understand. He got it for being willing to listen to the truth even though he had power. Some would argue that he had to be pretty much forced to listen and his power was diminishing. True . . . and he could still have refused to listen.

So, perhaps what we seek in our country at this time is not only those who will continue to take risks and “speak truth to power” but also those who, once we put them in power, will be willing and able to “hear truth spoken to power.” For me, that would mean we had truly freed ourselves of the authoritarian shackles of our past.

In a mature democracy, speaking truth to power need not cost officials or representatives their careers—need not cost the public the loss of good servants. While researching “speak truth to power,” I was interested to find an address to newly inducted executives in the Canadian civil service given by James R. Mitchell (2007), an experienced consultant on governance, in March 2007. The title is, “Can I Really Speak Truth to Power?” He spells out the nature of the phrase and shifts it from its religious origins firmly into the world of present-day civil service.

Mitchell (2007) calls the duty to speak truth to power “a ‘positive obligation’—a duty to do the right thing, and not simply refrain from doing the wrong thing” (p. 5). He goes on to acknowledge that there is no one “Truth” to be told in public life but that officials have a duty to communicate what they know (the facts), lessons they have learned from experience and their best judgment of what to do in light of those facts and experiences. They should do this, he says,

because it is their most fundamental duty, what they are paid to do. I quote:

- Not to tell people what they want to hear but what they need to hear
- Not to hide the facts . . . even if they run counter to received wisdom, or someone's preferred course of action
- Not to make your boss comfortable, but to equip him or her to do the right thing even if it makes them uncomfortable (p. 3)

What a different South Africa we would be living in if this was the established norm for what is expected of those in public life. I am not for a moment suggesting that we are the only country struggling with these issues—far from it. I am saying that, given our history we expected a lot of our new democracy, and we should not give up on it at this critical juncture but continue to protect it at every turn. All of us need to acknowledge our debt to those who have spoken truth to power in our past and ensure that their efforts were not in vain. Each of us, in our own way and our own context, needs to carry on speaking truth to power and supporting leaders who know how to listen to truth when in power.

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