

A Giant Steering the Ship: The Leadership Style of Oliver Tambo and the Lessons that can be drawn

Lauren C. Marx

Freedom Park, South Africa

lauren@freedompark.co.za

Abstract

Oliver Tambo dedicated most of his life to the liberation of South Africa from apartheid dominion, whereby he garnered international respect from his peers and contemporaries. He rose to prominence within the African National Congress (ANC) during a harrowing time in South Africa's history by consistently demonstrating leadership and guidance. Tambo's innate leadership skills originated through his unique mix of personality qualities that he steadfastly believed in his entire life. This tenacity and conviction allowed him to govern the leadership of the ANC—despite being in exile—in an efficient and systematic manner. The objective of this article is to examine the different leadership traits Tambo possessed, which allowed him to steer his political party's ship through the most turbulent of seas. Secondly, this article examines the current political climate in South Africa with the aim of addressing leadership models required to mould and sculpt South African society into the Tambos of today. These two objectives will largely be pursued through oral testimonies of those who worked and interacted with Tambo closely over the years, as well as anecdotal stories which demonstrate the level of leadership Tambo always provided.

Keywords: Oliver Tambo; leadership; apartheid; exile; governance; leadership models

Introduction

South Africa is currently in a state of deep political leadership crisis, with parties and people being split into factions not necessarily based on the ideal of leadership, but rather on what can potentially be gained from the factionalism. During the liberation struggle in South Africa, a strong opposition to apartheid policies emerged in various forms, most notably from the African National Congress (ANC) and its affiliates. The



ANC experienced its own unique hardships typical of the liberation struggle, such as the division of members into physical exile, the underground struggle, mass movements and resistance within South Africa, as well as trying to maintain a cohesive show of leadership and discipline across challenges. Oliver Tambo was one such leader who possessed the unique set of skills to steer his party through the decades of struggle, unrest, mutiny and uncertainty into the peaceful democratic post-1994 era. This study will unpack the leadership qualities that Tambo possessed and how he demonstrated these qualities consistently and without fear or favour. This study also relates these qualities to the current political context in South Africa, given the leadership void which presents a clear and present danger to freedom and democracy in our country. The author reveals weaknesses and challenges experienced by Tambo during the liberation struggle, which broadly dispel the image of the ANC as being completely cohesive. The intention is not to present a direct comparative analysis of current leadership versus that of Tambo, but rather to highlight how his skills as a leader can be interpreted for future generations to employ.

Research Process

Due to the fact that this article is based on an oral history project, key interviewees have been identified in order to unpack the questions posed here. These interviewees are individuals who worked closely with Tambo while in exile, and also from within the country, through mass movements, as well as opposition movements such as the Inkhata Freedom Party (IFP). These interviewees assisted in analysing the leadership skills that Tambo possessed, which could assist in addressing the current political leadership vacuum.

A Brief History of Oliver Tambo

Oliver Reginald Tambo was born in Bizana on 27 October 1917, in what is now the Eastern Cape. Tambo was given the opportunity to enrol at the Holy Cross Missionary School at Flagstaff in the Eastern Cape. He excelled in his studies and after five years at the Holy Cross he was accepted at St Peter's, a well-known school in Johannesburg, where he completed his matric. For the first time he was exposed to youngsters of other traditional African cultures, as well as to institutionalised segregation and racism. He was orphaned at age 16, when his parents passed away within a year of each other. During this time all scholars in the Transvaal wrote the same matric exams and Tambo achieved an excellent pass. This resulted in the Eastern Cape assembly of chiefs, the Bhunga, granting him a bursary of £30 a year to further his education at Fort Hare University. Black students were not allowed to study medicine at the time, so he opted for a course in the sciences and three years later graduated with a BSc degree in mathematics and physics. He also enrolled for a diploma in higher education. After being elected as chairperson of the Students' Representative Council of his residence,

the Anglican Beda Hall, he organised a student protest and was consequently expelled in 1940.

In 1942 Tambo returned to his former high school in Johannesburg to teach science and mathematics. Along with Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, Tambo was a founding member of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) in 1943, becoming its first national secretary and later a member of the National Executive in 1948. The ANCYL proposed a change in tactics in the anti-apartheid movement called “Programme of Action.” This programme advocated tactics such as boycotts, civil disobedience, strikes and non-collaboration. In 1955 Tambo became Secretary General of the ANC. In 1958 he became deputy president of the ANC and in 1959 was served with a five year banning order by the government. In response, Tambo was sent abroad by the ANC to mobilise opposition to apartheid. He settled with his family in Muswell Hill, north London, where he lived until 1990. He was involved in the formation of the South African United Front, which some believed helped bring about South Africa’s expulsion from the Commonwealth in 1961. In 1967, Tambo became acting president of the ANC. In 1985 he was re-elected president of the ANC. He returned to South Africa in 1991 following over 30 years in exile, and was elected national chairperson of the ANC in July of the same year. Tambo died due to complications from a stroke on 24 April 1993.

Leadership Models

According to Yaseen (2014, 21–23), there are several types of political leadership styles, namely autocratic, democratic, participative, goal-orientated and situational.

Tambo was affectionately referred to as “chief”, right from his speech writers to his body guards. As Monica Hunter specified “the chief’s generosity inspired the reciprocal commitment of the chief’s followers in the interest of the community as a whole” (Callinicos 1994, 13). Due to the gentle, consensus-type style of leadership emulated by Tambo, it is safe to eliminate autocratic leadership from the equation. Callinicos (1994, 28) expressed that many respondents were extremely proud of being associated with Tambo and felt that it was an “age of innocence.” Therefore, the focus on Tambo’s leadership style is within a democratic realm, but focussing on sub-themes of this style such as collective leadership, courageous leadership, ethical leadership, visionary leadership, and task-based leadership.

In 2007, the late Kader Asmal spoke of Tambo’s leadership, saying: “Succession is a crucial step in the [ANC’s] historic journey and we would do well to pause at OR’s life and to imbue its lessons in leadership as a guide to the future.” He further writes: “His ethos as a leader and how he related to others is a fundamental and poignant aspect we should pause to consider during the current period” (Asmal as quoted in Forest 2007, 4).

Tambo's Forms of Leadership

Tambo found himself in a situation that was deemed as the “exile leadership” (Torres and Mesebetsi 2010, 5), spending the majority of his time managing and forming international alliances and implementing the armed struggle both inside and outside of South Africa. Tokyo Sexwale (2013, 58) said:

The leadership example of OR is the type that evokes great motivation, is exalting and can drive nations or individuals to extraordinary lengths for the greater good. One has never been in more awe than during one's initial encounter with comrade OR.

Despite the years of service to the ANC, there is a growing perception that Tambo has not necessarily been given sufficient recognition for his role in keeping such a large liberation movement as the ANC intact for decades (Houston 2013, 20).

Collective Leadership Style

Callinicos (1994, 15) states that many people remarked on Tambo's incredible ability to listen and hear the different and opposing voices within his party and find a way to blend them harmoniously. In a personal interview with Essop Pahad (Interview 24 July 2017), he reiterated this:

He allowed members of the NEC to express themselves in whatever way they wanted to express themselves, but at the end of that he always tried to find a consensus. He had that great quality of really understanding and appreciating the different viewpoints that were raised and then trying to bring them together in a way in which everybody would accept that as a consensus position ... and so that was a very important part of his leadership—always trying to find a consensus, even in the most difficult of circumstances. But because he was such a fantastic listener, he was always able to find a consensus understanding and given the respect in which he was held within the ANC, even by his NEC members, he was able to then keep the organisation together; certainly in terms of making critically important decisions about what needed to be done.

At the June 1985 Kabwe conference, Tambo articulated his position regarding the importance of women within the struggle, politically and socially, as well as the need for drastic change in the conditions in which women lived their daily lives (Jordan 2007, 54).

Gertrude Shope (in Jordan 2007, 210) recalls Tambo's constant reiteration for the need to mobilise women and not to exclude them from the struggle for freedom, based simply on gender. Callinicos (2004, 225) points out that Tambo always had a very healthy appreciation for women in his own homestead and had realised from an early age what women could achieve through their hard work and quiet determination.

Pahad (2017) made the following statement with regard to Tambo and his take on gender equality:

On women for example, remember ... there was the whole feminist movement in Europe and especially in North America and the demands were becoming much stronger for the empowerment and emancipation of women. Inside the ANC, when this issue arose, OR had no qualms about just taking a very, very firm position on the recognition of gender parity and gender equality (well, parity we didn't achieve but certainly gender equality). He made a major speech in which he talked about women and women's position in the movement and how women leaders have to be respected, which paved the way for the ANC and its other alliance partners to take a much more progressive and forward-looking position with respect to the active participation of women on all levels of our structures.

Courageous Leadership Style

Pahad (2017) stated:

There is an element of fearlessness in him. But the element of taking very strong, principled decisions and not succumbing to untoward pressure, and I think this earned him [inaudible] people that wanted him to change and wouldn't change, but he was able to work with them ... He got the position because everybody in the ANC and the alliance realised that the single most important person we had as a leader was OR. Because of his qualities, he kept the ANC together under the most difficult and trying conditions. When sometimes they say you couldn't even see the tunnel; you didn't see anything coming out. At the same time, he was able to work with other people on the continent, in other parts of the world.

Ethical Leadership Style

Judge Albie Sachs (2017) spoke eloquently of Tambo's integrity as a leader by saying:

He could be smart and quick and sharp, but it was always underpinned by a total lack of ... ah, that sense of integrity, integrity, integrity being there all the time ... He shares that quality that Albert Luthuli had (and he worked very closely with Albert Luthuli) whom I think he influenced but who I think was an important influence on him as well but also one finds that quality in Nelson Mandela who was more charismatic but contained that element as well and then I would say [add] Desmond Tutu to the quartet. They all had that—a lot of humour in all the cases and some a little bit more than others and in that sense a very South African-African quality of being who had known—were born into—hardship and dispossession but who had known hope, courage, beauty and a certain internal serenity based on their convictions.

Callinicos (2017) spoke of Tambo's integrity when she referred to the Morogoro Conference and the unanimous belief the members had in his leadership:

At one point during the gang of eight at Morogoro, the election of a new president was put to the vote and OR withdrew and was unanimously re-elected and what they were saying by that is that we are critiquing some people in the movement but not OR. We trust him. It was interesting because the communists (of course, he was not a communist), trusted him because of his integrity so I think integrity (of course now it becomes so important) but it was important then as well. If you can't trust a leader, then you are not a leader.

Pahad (2017) stated:

He would never put his own interests or even the interests of his own organisation ahead of what would be considered to be in the wider interest of the struggle and the wider interest of the people of this country. And ... so, in those circumstances, OR would always have been looking for those elements that would unite the organisation and not keep on harping on those elements which disunite the organisation. He would in my view, and that is the way he worked, he would discourage ... personal attacks on people. He would discourage anyone who displayed signs of wanting to pursue their own interest. Because even much later, when other people were attacking him viciously, OR never replied back to them in a vicious way. He always tried to find a way to try to understand what the people were saying and try to bring the people together. So, for me, that is a critical element of what I would call ethical leadership. And it would also mean putting the interest of your organisation first; your people first, long before you put your own interest to the fore.

Visionary Leadership Style

Pahad (2017) stated:

... another part of his leadership ... the capacity to see ahead of his time and to recognise what is pretty important needs that will arise that are going to force the ANC to change some of their very clearly held positions. For example, like Kabwe, the very big discussion was of course if non-Africans should be elected to the NEC of the ANC. OR was very clear on that, that the time had come and some people argued that the time is not yet ready because we haven't had enough time to consult with the people at home; the leadership in Robben Island and what will the majority of Africans say, but OR was very clear: the time has come for such a change. In some of the heated and controversial discussions at Kabwe (there was a small minority that was against it) he stood and came out very firmly.

Tambo managed, under difficult circumstances, to keep the liberation movement as homogenous as possible. Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi (2017) had the following to say regarding this matter:

Mr Tambo was a very outstanding leader you know. Highly intellectual but a visionary as well. So I was not surprised that he was able to keep our people in exile together apart from the breakaway that I mentioned.

Task-based Leadership

Pahad (2017) stated:

If you had to do speeches for him at conferences, he would sit up all night asking for the drafts and he would change commas, we would change full stops, he would change words, he would ask why are you putting it this way and not that way and sometimes drafts after drafts, if he was not satisfied, he would just go and speak. Because he wanted to be sure that what he was saying would carry weight. So if you look at his speeches very carefully, you will see that there is not much rhetoric, if at all any. There is no populism—he is only trying to find a way to have a deep understanding and analysis of a particular period.

Callinicos (2017) echoed Pahad's sentiments when referring to Tambo's incredible ability to listen to all sides of the conversation, and making consensus-type decisions involving all people, but at the same time, ensuring that young people learned from this:

He was the school master always educating people and quite subtle. The description of how—unlike the communist party—which would follow democratic centralism where you would vigorously debate an issue, in the end you would take a vote and the majority would then be the decision. With OR, as I mentioned in the book, it is a more traditional consensus approach where there would be vigorous discussion and he would never hurry people—it could take two or three days a meeting—and if somebody hadn't spoken, he would ask them what they felt and he would probe them in case they were being reticent and he would sense this as a very sensitive and highly intelligent man and he would finally arrange for a final meeting the next day and he would spend that time going through all the opinions and thinking about the issues and then finally coming to a solution. So the next day, he would draw from the different people's opinion, in a very creative way and a nuanced way so that people felt their opinion had been heard and had been included. So it was very skilful ... he would go over and correct grammar, or a spelling mistake and it had to be re-written so that it can be absolutely perfect and it was his way of also coaching people to think in a more nuanced way but at the same time you had to have a clear message. So, his skills as a teacher were very evident there. He spoke very clearly. All his speeches are very clear—they are not you know, all that analytical or conceptual. He is saying: "This is what we have to do. This is where we are." So it was a bit analytical but it wasn't abstract. It was very important that people could understand what the message of his speech was.

Anecdotal Stories

Buthelezi (2017) related an anecdotal story of Tambo:

My sister lived in Daveyton and he was in Benoni practising as an attorney. Now there was an old man that used to drive my father's cars and of course his licence had expired and he was not supposed to touch my car. I had an appointment and the car was taken for service and he had a prodigal son who had disappeared and he used my car to look

for this son while I was in Johannesburg in Benoni. And the car actually got in an accident. Now as far as insurance was concerned I could not say this old man was driving the car because he had no right to do so. So I went to seek advice from Mr Tambo as a lawyer. He said to me: “Let’s cook up a story. Let us say your car was behind a lorry carrying a lot of timber because the damage was all on the bonnet you see. At a stop, the timber you know ...” and that thing he said made us succeed to get the insurance!

Sachs (2017) eloquently and succinctly summed up the way people felt about Tambo by saying: “There were many leaders who we really admired enormously but the one we loved was Oliver Tambo.” And I think that captures very well the sense of connection people had with Tambo.

Callinicos (2017) fondly remembered Tambo’s warmth and inclusiveness when she was invited to his homestead to research her book for his biography. She stated:

I think he certainly made me feel very welcome when he asked me to write the book and was very interested in the books I had written on social history from below and the first thing that really thrilled me that he did was to invite me to accompany him to Nkantolo on Pondoland and that was an amazing experience as I had not actually been to the rural areas with somebody who comes from there and at Nkantolo and Holy Cross and the area there, I interviewed so many people including his sisters and it was such a wonderful feeling of the collective warm and inclusive culture that he had grown up in and I think that is definitely his foundations of a leader of an African national movement.

Weaknesses of Tambo’s Leadership Style

It is interesting to note that although Tambo was regarded as the consummate diplomat, according to Gumede (2008, 26), Tambo’s leadership was constantly under attack, particularly with regard to MK camps—Tambo all the while trying very hard to avoid factionalism and slates. Ellis and Sechaba (1992, 41) pointedly infer that Tambo’s relaxed and easy-going leadership style was seen as a weakness by his critics, in that it allowed the ANC to be hijacked by the communists, which were seen as playing an increasingly more dominant role in the party. Houston (2013, 23) also states that cadres, while having great respect for Tambo, felt that his cautious manner in dealing with sensitive matters was part of the problem in respect to the camps.

Callinicos (2017) mentioned the camps and the difficult conditions in which cadres had to operate. It became a point of contention with many people feeling conditions in the camps were completely unacceptable. Chris Hani was particularly outspoken about conditions in the camps and drafted a memorandum to Tambo, which charged the leadership with incompetence and living luxuriously in exile (Ndebele and Niefertagdien 2004, 587). Callinicos (2017) had this to say on the subject:

One can criticise his strengths which turned out to be problematic like his steady, step-by-step approach when the country is burning type of thing ... Nevertheless, there were people, even Chris Hani said his style by doing things step-by-step, there are times when you have to intervene immediately and put a stop to it. Perhaps he didn't appreciate the fact that if Tambo had done that, it might have blown the ANC wide apart. Because the people that were guilty of these camp abuses were his top leadership. If he got rid of all of them, the ANC would have imploded and they were getting closer and closer to both the worldwide approval and the indications that the National Party's beginning to crack.

Karis and Carter (1972, 43) also make mention of certain weaknesses in Tambo's leadership, specifically at the Morogoro Conference, which Tambo called for in 1969 to deal with cadres' grievances. MK dissidents heavily criticised Tambo for failing to act on their demands, claiming he failed to take up their call for an immediate transfer to South Africa to fight the struggle from within (Callinicos 1994, 9).

Tambo's Leadership Style in the Current Political Context

It is possible to erroneously place momentous historical events into epochs for the sake of ease, but one must consider that politics, history and human nature are fluid and complex. Just as South Africa evolved under the Union after the Anglo-Boer War (or South African War), it too frayed and gave way to apartheid, which led to the rise of liberation movements and ultimately democracy in South Africa. While the above example is a gross oversimplification of events, it is important to remember that each phase or epoch of South Africa's history was marred by internal strife, turmoil, political agendas and violence, which inevitably caused a fraying-at-the-edges scenario, which led to the next phase or epoch. The dawn of democracy in South Africa was largely seen as a miraculous and relatively seamless transition from a regime that perpetrated crimes against humanity to one of a rainbow nation, filled with hope and underpinned by a sense of renewal and euphoria. That status quo slowly faded into a mirage when the democratic government, led by the ANC, began to face the harsh reality of democratic governance and the challenges that South Africa faced, such as economic and social hardships. Poverty and unemployment levels remained unsustainably high, closely coupled with unprecedented crime levels. The ANC played on their credibility as a famed liberation movement but ran the risk of losing their moral credibility if it did not adapt from a revolutionary to a governing party.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in corruption, malfeasance and misadministration in government and the private sector. This has been coupled with large-scale looting of state-owned enterprises, which form the economic backbone of the country and the deployment of pliable individuals willing to do the bidding of a few leaders who have proven to be punch-drunk on power with uncontrolled greed. This article contends that there are many individuals in government who possessed the leadership skills of Tambo, and who maintained a level of transparency and integrity that kept the country appealing to international investment and created a sense of hope

for citizens that have become accustomed to scandalous political headlines on a daily basis. I also argue that the governing party, through measures of intimidation and control strategies, purposefully avoided any form of collective leadership in a bid to avoid having to account for any wrong-doings politically, socially and economically. In recent months and years, the country has seen a resurgence of protests, where citizens at all level of society have spoken out against weak, corrupt leadership and in doing so, have become the vanguard of courageous and ethical leadership in a time where the current status quo is beginning to fray at the edges. Society at large has begun to mobilise and many of Tambo's leadership qualities re-emerged through action by civil society, large businesses, churches and non-governmental organisations. The year 2017 was set to honour the centenary of the birth of Tambo and all he stood for. It was also a year that manifested political scandals that stood in sharp contrast to the principles that governed Tambo's life. The people of the country have become tired of vague and inadequate policies that do little to improve the life of the man in the street, but certainly enrich a small group of factionalised and compromised individuals. There was a strong societal call to heed the guiding principles of Tambo's leadership style in order to maintain good governance and a sense of vision for the future of South Africa.

Conclusion

Nelson Mandela (in Ndlovu 2013, 59) eloquently summed up the leadership style of Tambo with these affectionate words:

It is a phenomenal leader who can succeed in exile to keep united a vast multiracial organisation with divergent schools of thought, with a membership deployment in distant continents, and a youth seething with anger at the repression of their people; a youth who believe that anger alone without resources and proper planning can help overthrow a racist regime. Oliver Tambo achieved all this. To political and common law prisoners inside the country, to foreign freedom fighters, diplomats, Heads of State, O.R. was acknowledged as a shining example of a smart and balanced leader who was sure to help restore the dignity of the oppressed people and put their destiny in their [own] hands.

It is fair to say that Tambo possessed a rare clarity of vision in his thought-making processes. He was consistently considered in all decisions and inclusive of all ideas. His ascension to leader of the ANC, albeit with a certain degree of reluctance, enabled the party to garner international attention and mobilisation against apartheid South Africa, but also created the structures internally to fight oppression. His meticulous attention to detail was underscored by his ability to navigate the often murky political waters of revolution without compromising his steadfast integrity. Marti Luther King Junior was once quoted as saying: "The ultimate measure of man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy" (quoted in Bell 2006).

During Tambo's time as president, he certainly experienced his fair share of hardships, challenges and indeed controversy, if one considers the reaction and response to ANC camps and blurring of target lines within the country. However, Tambo maintained his course through rocky waters and shone his light on everyone and everything he came across. It is this ethical, diplomatic, collective, courageous and visionary leadership at all structures which allowed the ANC to return home a party of the people and lead South Africa into democracy.

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