

Neville Alexander obituary

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Dr. Neville Alexander on his last visit to the University of the Free State discussing the role of language and culture in creating tolerance in South Africa at the International Institute for Studies in Race, Reconciliation and Social Justice (Photo: Johan Roux, 19 March 2012)

South Africa has lost a great scholar, a principled activist, a generous humanitarian and a formidable intellect; the last of the true revolutionaries – Prof. Jonathan Jansen, Vice-Chancellor and Rector, University of the Free State (Jansen 2012).

The language world laments the loss of Dr Neville Edward Alexander, acclaimed linguist and academic, intellectual and anti-apartheid struggle veteran, who died on 27 August 2012 at the age of 75 following a battle with cancer. At the time of his

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death he had retired from his post (31 December 2011) as Director of the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (Praesa), a non-governmental entity housed by the University of Cape Town (UCT) which he had established in 1992.

In his non-official and very detailed biography, Magnien (2012) describes distinct stages in the intellectual and revolutionary life and times of Neville Alexander. His humble beginnings started in Cradock, a rural town in the Eastern Cape, where he was born on 22 October 1936 to David James Alexander, a carpenter, and Dimbiti Bisho Alexander, a schoolteacher. Cradock incidentally is also prominent in the history of the Afrikaans language. The town is renowned for being the place where the first Dutch newspaper, *Het Kaapsche Grensblad* (1844), was established and for the role the newspaper played in an early separatist movement (1820–1854) that strove to obtain autonomy for the region from the Cape Colony in the south. This newspaper published the first Afrikaans in print in the form of a selection of letters in support of the movement, a development that I have (albeit controversially) argued constituted one of the first Afrikaans language movements (Du Plessis 1986).

Neville Alexander's educational career, the birth of his political awareness as well as his "conversion" to becoming a socialist, happened during a period of his life entitled by Magnien (2012) as "*University and the becoming of a political activist (1953–1961)*". This section of the biography details his student beginnings at UCT, the completion of his Masters at Tübingen University (West Germany) and the Alexander Humboldt Stiftung scholarship he was awarded for this purpose. It also covers his involvement at the time in a variety of social movements and anti-apartheid organisations.

A next stage in his life carries the title "*Return to Cape Town and 'an accident waiting to happen' (1961–1964)*". Events in South Africa led Alexander to be convinced about the employment of guerrilla warfare as a means to overthrow the apartheid government and the creation of revolutionary movements for this purpose. He interestingly also worked as a teacher and taught at a local school at the time before the apartheid judicial system put an end to all of this. By the end of 1963 he and a team of co-conspirators were detained, charged and convicted of conspiracy to commit sabotage.

He got imprisoned at Robben Island, thereby entering a new phase of his life, entitled "*Imprisonment on Robben Island (1964–1974)*". Together with Nelson Mandela and other prominent contemporary leaders, the time in prison was turned into a period of intellectual preparation for taking leadership in a future, liberated South Africa. He apparently also strengthened his knowledge of Xhosa as part of the campaign, a language he learned as a youth in Cradock. So intense was the programme that the inmates designed for themselves, that they colloquially referred to it as the "University of Robben Island". Lindsey Wilson produced a 55 min film, *Robben Island – Our University* in 1988 to give face to this incredible effort (Wilson 1988). Alexander was one of three panellists partaking in the film. I was privileged to have attended its first launch at the then University of Natal during that year.

In 1974 Alexander was released from prison but placed under house arrest for 5 years, marking another stage in his life, which Magnien (2012) entitled "*House*

arrest, Black Consciousness, and Sached (1974–1989)”. He now became involved in a fight for socialism, briefly brushed shoulders with Steve Biko and his Black Consciousness Movement and also actively started to produce influential writings. One of his most famous books called *One Azania, One Nation: The National Question in South Africa* (Alexander 1979), published under the pseudonym “No Sizwe” as it was banned in South Africa, was finished by the end of his house arrest. According to Magnien (2012), Alexander attempts in this book to “facilitate the unification of the national liberation movement by inciting a discussion to take place on the basis of national unity in South Africa”. This was his response to the National Party’s conception of nationality that had been proposed at the time and that envisaged a South Africa where English and Afrikaans would be the national languages and African languages regional languages, in other words a model where the nation was pre-defined and where “others” were recognised and co-opted but not as “nationals”. Alexander also started teaching at UCT in the Department of Sociology and became involved in the South African Committee on Higher Education (Sached), an important leftist centre for alternative and anti-apartheid education. In 1980 he was appointed Cape Town director. This group promoted the notion of “Education for Liberation”, a slogan quite different from the rather disastrous alternative within ANC oriented organisations of the time, “Liberation before Education”. These and other views he expressed in a collection of essays, *Sow the wind*, published in 1986 (Alexander 1986). Whilst questioning existing hegemonies, Sached also promoted alternative social forms. In 1986 Alexander helped set up the National Languages Project (NLP), arguably one of the most influential language “think tanks” during the liberation struggle.

In 1988 he was awarded a post-doctoral fellowship at UCT. This allowed him to study “the language question” in South Africa in depth. Two rather controversial publications arose from this scholarship during the course of 1989, a report on the language question for UCT’s Institute for the Study of Public Policy (Alexander 1989a) and Alexander’s controversial essay, *Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania* (Alexander 1989b), based on the report. It was during this period that he started developing his notion of national trilingualism: knowledge of home language, knowledge of a language other than the home language and knowledge of English (as *lingua franca*), a proposal he made towards the end of the book. Underlying this proposal was his conclusion that South Africa would remain multilingual, in spite of the so-called “unassailable” position of English, according to Magnien (2012) controversial thinking at a time where an English-only line of thinking was fast arising as an answer to the enforced bilingualism in Afrikaans and English of the apartheid era. Alexander’s proposal was also not received well in establishment circles at the time, as it did not entrench the position of Afrikaans. With this book Alexander solidly joined the broader discourse on language in South Africa which up to that point was dominated by a rather limited discourse on the position of Afrikaans in the “new” South Africa (Du Plessis and Van Gensen 1999).

Language policy and national unity (Alexander 1989b) coincided with one of the most productive phases in Alexander’s life, a period during which he established himself beyond doubt as the leading light on language matters in South Africa. The era from 1989 onwards incidentally also marked the period of political transition in

South Africa, one of intense discourse on a language policy for a “new” South Africa as the overview of Du Plessis and Van Gensen (1999) suggests. Magnien (2012) entitles this phase of Alexander’s life as “*The 1990s (Wosa, Praesa, Langtag)*”, a title that refers to Alexander’s involvement in a variety of organisations of which specifically the language organisations played a central role in actually bringing about a new language regime. Alexander remained committed to the cause of the poor and to the ideal of establishing a new order in South Africa. From April 1990 he headed Wosa (Workers’ Organisation for Socialist Action), an organisation created to advance working-class interests. He was concerned about the marginalisation of the majority. The establishment in 1992 of the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (Praesa) at UCT was a logical outcome of his concern and an extension of the work of the NLP, as this new project focused on language policy in education with special reference to multilingual education and the first-language or home-language (conventionally, mother-tongue) as medium of instruction. Praesa started promoting the notion of home-language based bilingual (and trilingual) education within the multilingual framework that Alexander first proposed in *Language policy and national unity* in 1989. The Project today is renowned for its series of *Occasional Papers* on a variety of topics related to language policy in education (PRAESA 2012) and still remains the leading research unit in its field in the country. His third book, *Some are more equal than others* (Alexander 1993), was published a year after Praesa got off the ground.

Alexander came to play a key role as advisor on language policy to various government agencies during the transitional period (from the 1990s onwards). This culminated in his being asked in November 1995 by the then Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology to chair a Language Plan Task Group (Langtag) which had to draw up the outline for a national language plan (Langtag 1996). This plan has served as the foundation of and guideline for further developing national language policy (DAC 2003b) and legislation (RSA 2011) pertaining to language issues in South Africa. Alexander also headed the Advisory Panel on Language Policy to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology that drafted the language policy framework as well as the first South African Languages Bill (DAC 2003a). He also played a key role in establishing the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) in 1996, a language body envisaged by the South African constitution to play a central role in language development and language promotion (RSA 1996). He served as Vice-Chairperson of the Board until his resignation in March 1998 because of the apparent incapacity of the Board to fulfil its mandate.

Magnien (2012) describes the last phase of Alexander’s life under the heading “*The twenty-first century (future of African languages, Acalan, and prizes)*”. Here Alexander headed a national task group on a language policy framework for higher education that published their report in July 2002. The report, entitled *Language Policy Framework for South African Higher Education* (CHE 2001), presented an overview of the language situation in tertiary education in South Africa, looked at the plight of developing the so-called “African languages” (Bantu languages) and made concrete proposals about using English and Afrikaans as languages of tuition in the interim. It served as a basis for the actual language policy framework that the then Minister of Education published in 2002 (Ministry of Education 2002). In 2003

Alexander published a series of lectures on the South African question that he had given in Germany between 1999 and 2000 entitled, *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa* (Alexander 2003—first published in 2002 by the University of Natal Press). The book presents a critical assessment on “where we stand” as a country. In it he argues the South African “miracle” is perhaps not what we thought it to be and that as a country we are not that unique; we are the outcome of socio-historical circumstances. It is a book that has sparked controversy mainly because of the author’s unapologetic socialist agenda and criticism of the “nation-building” project in South Africa, which he argues is failing because of capitalist interests. He essentially takes the ANC government to task for their “historic compromises” and “back-tracking” on many issues: “nationalisation”, “language policy”, their “class compromises” which he argues has led to our present state of social stasis and even the lowering of the living standards of the masses, while the new black bourgeoisie and State kleptocrats in the State apparatus and NGOs “enrich themselves” (Gool 2012). Reviewers have taken him up on these and other issues, but nevertheless have conceded that the book is essential reading for those following developments in South Africa (Nash et al. 2003).

It is in this period that Alexander also started to place more emphasis on the languages of “ordinary” South Africans. Through talks, workshops and projects that he initiated during this period he started to emphasise more particularly the role of the Bantu languages in (South) African society. This interest culminated in 2004 in his co-chairing the Steering Committee for the Implementation of the Language Plan of Action for Africa (Ilpaa) in Yaoundé, Cameroon and in 2006 in his role in the co-establishment of the African Academy of Languages (Acalan). One of the objectives of the latter organisation is to promote “convivial and functional” multilingualism in education. It also strives to develop and promote “African languages as factors of African integration and development” (Acalan 2012). Alexander was instrumental in conceptualising several of the core projects run by Acalan. He also served as member of the Western Cape Language Committee until 2005 (De Klerk 2009).

Although a humble person who always avoided the limelight or honours bestowed on him, he did make three exceptions. In 2004 he accepted the Order of the Disa, a provincial honour awarded him by a former Western Cape (South Africa) Premier, Ebrahim Rasool, for his commitment to socio-political issues and education. In 2008 he accepted the Linguapax Prize, granted annually in Barcelona, and awarded him to honour his contributions to linguistic diversity and multilingual education (Magnien 2012). The year before he accepted an appointment as Professor Extraordinary for Language Planning in the Department of Afrikaans en Nederlands [Afrikaans and Dutch] at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, a post he filled until 2009.

Alexander’s intellectual output is marked by his active participation in academic life through a seemingly endless stream of papers at a range of conferences and talks in general, locally and abroad, and through his books, academic and popular articles and contributions to newspapers and other more popular print media. Almost not a month went by that Neville did not participate in some or other forum. Most of these

inputs did find their way into publicised format, leaving behind a legacy of writings that will influence thinking in years to come. Kelwyn Sole and Rochelle Kapp, both colleagues from UCT, have assessed his academic input in the following words:

His books, articles and position papers on language and education, as well as on race and the post-apartheid state, have been a major influence on a new generation of scholars and activists. In particular, he played a leading role in developing and shaping an agenda of multilingualism, which advocated the centrality of language for education and nation building. His vision and acuity will be greatly missed (University of Cape Town 2012).

It is particularly Alexander's vision on the crucial relation between language, nation-building and national unity and education that will linger on in local language debates for years to come, especially now that South Africa has adopted a so-called "language act". Strikingly absent from this piece of legislation (RSA 2011) are any arrangements that can realise the strategic relationship Alexander envisaged, that is if for the sake of argument one accepts the nation-state as central construct. The act is all about administrative arrangements regarding the proposed quadrilingual dispensation (an attempt to make the eleven official languages dispensation more workable). As a legal mechanism to ensure institutionalised multilingualism the act resembles a language scheme, but in its weakest possible form (Du Plessis 2012). It does not address the cardinal role of societal and individual multilingualism within an emerging South African nation. It also does not present the required legal basis for contesting the current state's policy of convenience regarding the entrenchment of English as undisputed language of government. If there is one thing the current government seems to want to avoid at all costs, it's more litigation on language rights. Case law resulting from language litigation so far has produced mixed results (Lubbe 2004; Du Plessis 2010) and actually mostly served to emphasise the government's role in negative language planning (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997, p. 230 ff.) in South Africa, planning directed at restricting the language rights of speakers of Afrikaans and the other local languages.

Alexander was the first of the "true revolutionaries" to take on the language question in South Africa in the early 1980s. His postulation that the language question was inseparable from the national question laid the basis for a more articulate debate at the time, a position which moved beyond the oversimplified notion of English as national language of South Africa that seemed to have dominated (and actually still does) thinking within the liberation movement at large and within ANC circles specifically. In the aftermath of Soweto 1976, until today associated with the rejection of Afrikaans as language of the oppressor, his recognition of the crucial role of this language and of the other languages of so-called "Bantu Education" (an education system closely associated with apartheid), was not only revolutionary but simultaneously controversial and courageous. For Alexander these languages were to play a central role in the liberalisation and democratisation of South Africa and in cultivating social cohesion, hence his introduction of the notion of "language planning from below" (Alexander 1992). Through this notion he also challenged the "canonical model of language

planning”, a language planning closely associated with legitimising the nation-state. Although he unambiguously recognised the role of English as one of South Africa’s languages of wider communication, he was dead set against the hegemony of this language in service of colonial and sectional interests. A quote from an article on language policy and planning in the “new” South Africa elucidates his views on the ideology of English:

The seduction of an English-only or an English-mainly policy comes from both economic and ideological sources. On the surface, it appears to people who already have proficiency in English (the world language) that the most economical language policy consists of encouraging or even compelling everybody to learn English even at the expense of their first languages. Such a policy, it is believed, will cost much less than a policy of multilingualism which involves, among other things, thousands of translators and interpreters. Ideologically, those who are proficient in English are in possession of invaluable cultural capital; the sky is the limit for them as far as high-paying jobs and career options are concerned in a context of poverty and inequality. Such unspoken, perhaps even unconscious, pressures are decisive in the emergence of a *middle-class language policy* [own emphasis] (Alexander 1997).

One should therefore understand Alexander’s steadfast and consistent promotion of multilingual practices within this light, in other words as instrumental towards nation building and national unity, a view that according to Dollie (2011, p. 141) challenges both the “One Language, One Nation” slogan as well as the equally outdated “Language as Culture” slogan that underlies essentialist thinking about language. Alexander’s primary concern has always been the marginalised, the urban and rural poor and the black working class (Magnien 2012). Nation-building in Alexanderian terms thus implied “...a process of communication and struggle...” (Dollie 2011, p. 159), benefitting these marginalised citizens. By institutionalising multilingualism, Alexander seems to have believed, their languages essentially become instruments of empowerment towards social cohesion that in the long term would improve their position and provide them with access to services and goods. No wonder Khadija Patel, a staunch admirer and dedicated follower, aptly described him in her obituary as “Neville Alexander - a linguistic revolutionary” (Patel 2012).

Although not a socialist myself, I was nevertheless first inspired by Neville Alexander in the early 1980s to join this “new” language struggle which for him in the end became a “war of position” as Dollie (2011, p. 153) describes it in one of the most comprehensive appraisals of Alexander’s intellectual legacy until now. He actively partook in the process of formulating new language policies; he was prepared to work both with government and even the strong Afrikaans language lobby in pursuit of his ideals. However, Patel (2012) stresses that in all of these endeavours he never “kowtowed” to anyone, not even himself. According to her, Alexander at some point had to painfully admit that his involvement in establishing a framework for language policy in higher education (effectively securing the position of English and Afrikaans as languages of teaching and learning) played into the hands of “neo-apartheid” thinking as it compromised the role of the Bantu languages.

For me the “new” language struggle involved putting into practice institutionalised multilingual practices which created spaces for both Afrikaans and marginalised languages, thereby contributing to what Strauss (1997, p. 67) has described as “language justice”. The realisation of language justice would imply a dispensation where a form of harmony is created through the concrete balancing of interests (rights) and where the state is merely responsible for managing language resources towards this end, not necessarily for being the driver and initiator. I have described this view in my inaugural address as the basis for a post-Babel analysis of language policy (Du Plessis 2003), not necessarily a position to which Neville would have subscribed. Our common ground, I nevertheless would like to believe, was the commitment to realising a functional multilingual dispensation that would concretely aid the process of democratisation in South Africa and give voice to marginalised citizens. The establishment in 1993, with the partial financial help of three organisations that are committed to the struggle for social justice, of the Unit for Language Facilitation and Empowerment (ULFE) at the University of the Free State under my directorship, I see as the concrete realisation of this ideal. This Unit has adopted as its mission “...to develop innovative and economically sustainable options concerning the establishment of institutional multilingualism, with a view to contributing towards the consolidation of language justice in South Africa” (ULFE 2012). The three organisations involved in the establishment of the Unit were the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa¹ (IDASA) (IDASA 2012), an organisation that played a central role in facilitating dialogue between opposing forces in South Africa in the dying years of apartheid, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA 2012), an organisation that supported organisations working for change in South Africa during the apartheid years, and Fonds voor Ontwikkelingssamewerking (FOS), the North–South organisation of the socialist movement in Flanders, Belgium (FOS 2012), an organisation that strongly supported the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Today the ULFE is recognised as an established player in the language world of South Africa, a position that Neville himself respected and recognised on many occasions. It is not inappropriate for me at this time to recognise him as the inspiration behind these efforts.

We shall dearly miss the revolutionary, the scholar, the teacher, the worker, the man, Neville Alexander. However, his legacy lives on and is echoed in the closing words of *Sow the wind* “A luta continua!” (Alexander 1986, p. 180).

Bloemfontein, 16 September 2012.

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¹ Now the Institute for a Democracy in Africa (IDASA).

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