

NUSAS - ITS BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Geoff Budlender, Chairman of the NUSAS Interim Management Committee, gave an informal talk on NUSAS. The talk, which is summarised below, was intended to give participants some information on the history and development of NUSAS. It was felt that the present NUSAS could not be understood without reference to its past.

NUSAS was founded in 1924 by Leo Marquard, who became its first President. Nine universities affiliated - UCT, Stellenbosch, Wits, Pretoria, Rhodes, Grey College (now UOFS), and Potchefstroom.

The prime motivation for the formation of NUSAS was contact - it was hoped that this would lead to mutual understanding.

In 1933, Wits proposed that Fort Hare (black) be admitted to full membership. The proposal was shelved by referring it to a commission - this was in an attempt to appease the Afrikaans universities. They were already showing signs of restlessness as a result of the growth of Afrikaner nationalism, and separatist Afrikaner organisations were being formed in several fields.

However, the shelving of the issue did not help - Pretoria, Grey College and Potchefstroom broke away later in 1933, giving as one of their reasons that the proposal had not been rejected outright. They also complained that NUSAS was "overwhelmingly negrophilistic, imperialistic and liberalistic in colour"; it "displayed a liberalistic tendency, especially as a result of the strong influence of socialistic international-minded Jews, who wish to effect a general world citizenship without founding it on genuine nationalism".

Stellenbosch, however, remained a member of NUSAS. In 1934 the Constitution was amended so that NUSAS became a federation of the SRC's of "European" universities, and of local branches at "European" universities and colleges. The Fort Hare proposal was then rejected on those grounds.

In 1936 Stellenbosch finally disaffiliated, and NUSAS was left as an all-white union of students at English-language universities and colleges.

In 1939 war was declared. After heated controversy, NUSAS took its first major "political" position - in favour of the war effort by South Africa. This was clearly not a pure "student" issue - it was a broader societal issue on which NUSAS had felt constrained to take a position.

The repercussions were enormous. The gulf between English and Afrikaans grew - the ANSB was pro-Nazi - and at the end of the war, in 1945, Fort Hare was finally admitted to membership. In 1947 the black section of the University of Natal followed suit.

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Meanwhile, the ANSB had collapsed; but in 1948 the Afrikaanse Studentebond (ASB) was formed.

1948 was also the year in which the Nationalist Party came to power - and inevitably NUSAS came into conflict with the government, for among the objects of NUSAS, as stated in the new 1945 Constitution, were: "to defend democracy as the fundamental basis of every sphere of our national existence"; "to maintain the fundamental rights of all to the free expression of opinion by speech and press"; and to "encourage the promotion of equality of educational and economic opportunity for all in South Africa with special attention to the under-privileged".

Thus NUSAS already had basic objects which committed it to action in contentious public areas; but the major effort was in those areas affecting "students as such".

In 1956 NUSAS engaged in protest for the first time - over the proposed segregation of the "open" universities. For three years NUSAS staged a running battle with the government on this issue. The battle was lost, and the universities were segregated in 1959 - but the effects of the battle were to show for a long time. NUSAS and the universities, having entered the "political" arena in a big way, would never be the same again. These protests were the prototype of many that were to follow.

Meanwhile, NUSAS was having difficulty in maintaining the involvement of black students. Many of them saw themselves as blacks first, and then students - so it was natural that they should involve themselves primarily in the Congress Movement, and less so in the student union.

There was further problem as far as the black students were concerned - the need for NUSAS to maintain its boundaries required a "middle-of-the-road" policy with regard to its affiliated centres. It could not be too radical, or the white centres would disaffiliate; it could not be too conservative, or the black centres would disaffiliate - as some did at various stages, only to re-join later.

This boundary-conflict repeated what had been shown in the difficulties over the admission of Fort Hare in 1933 - but the boundaries NUSAS was trying to maintain were, of course, rather different.

The government's repression of the Congress Movement had the effect of forcing more black students into NUSAS, and NUSAS became possibly the most outspokenly radical legal opposition group. The black students exerted an influence out of all proportion to their still relatively small numbers, and NUSAS policy moved rapidly.

By 1964 NUSAS had forged strong unity between black and white English-speaking students. In 1962 NUSAS had broken off all contact with the ASB, but although this decision was reversed in 1963, this was but a formal reversal - meaningful contact had been lost a long time before.

NUSAS policy in 1964 was strong and clear, and programmes were effectively run. Some of the programmes run today date back to that time of growth.

From 1964, however, NUSAS was forced onto the defensive. The involvement of past NUSAS office-bearers in the African Resistance Movement led to massive attacks on NUSAS, led by the then Minister of Justice - Mr. B.J. Vorster. (It may be claimed with some accuracy that Vorster has had a personal war on with NUSAS for quite some time - and it is probably true that the crushing of NUSAS is one of those aims closest to his heart).

Vorster's attack took the form of an attempt to drive a wedge between the NUSAS leadership and the students on the campuses - and NUSAS defended itself. The NUSAS response over the next few years was essentially defensive, in response to one attack after another. In 1966 the NUSAS President, Ian Robertson, was banned - and massive protests followed.

But the programmes and projects did not operate as effectively as before, and there was little development of new thought. A rigid liberal ideology took over, as the universities and NUSAS fought proposed legislation which would have limited black students at the "open" universities to academic activities and would have allowed campus clubs and societies to discriminate against these students.

For various reasons, the government backed down, and the Bills were withdrawn. The protests against them had been large, and a lengthy war of attrition had been carried on. Even today, however, these Bills are a threat hanging over the "open" universities - and they are never allowed to forget it.

From 1967, black students started to show more dissatisfaction with NUSAS. The pressures of an apartheid society were making it all the more difficult for NUSAS to realise its ideals in action - compromises took place. Simultaneously, the growing conservatism of the white students forced NUSAS policy towards that direction - boundaries prevailed over policy.

Massive protests continued, particularly in 1968 and 1969, but black disenchantment grew. In 1969, after various preliminary meetings, SASO was formed.

The NUSAS response indicated how NUSAS had developed over the past few years. The initial reaction was one of guarded hostility to a separatist organisation. Several of the leaders saw the SASO development as healthy and to be welcomed, but they were in the minority.

The NUSAS response to SASO helped to shape the SASO attitude to NUSAS - which developed from recognition of NUSAS as the National Union (1969), to withdrawal of that recognition (1970), to withdrawal from co-operation with NUSAS (1970).

NUSAS developed its response in the other direction - from non-recognition (1969), to recognition of SASO as a body "well able" to represent black students (1970), to non-competition with SASO on black campuses (1971).

Other changes were also taking place within NUSAS. It was re-structured in 1970 - but the changes that took place were not merely organisational. Affiliate organisations were set up, and with this came an increasing movement away from "talking", and towards "action". NUSAS became involved in "project-politics" - not at the expense of the old "protest-politics", but alongside it. The protests became more radical in their nature - both in the issues chosen, and in the protest methods.

As this took place, so the government's attacks on NUSAS took place with renewed vigour. Passports were removed from Executive members as a matter of course; security police activities were believed to increase; dawn raids took place; and students were deported.

The culmination of these attacks was the establishment of the "Schlebusch Commission" (then with Mr. J.T. Kruger as chairman) in February 1972, leading to the banning of eight people associated with NUSAS - including the President, Vice-President, Past President, and General Secretary. Further attacks were confidently expected.

And so the NUSAS of 1973 was forced back into a position where it had a clear choice to make - defence or attack. The urge to defend is always strong in this situation; the events in NUSAS after 1964 indicate the dangers inherent in this choice.

Boundary-policy conflicts in NUSAS remain, but the issues are different. At the same time, there is argument over whether the boundaries should be accepted as they stand - and whether NUSAS should accept that it is largely a union of white English-speaking students. Should it move towards the Afrikaans-speaking students? Is there a basis for any organisation on the basis of "contact", bearing in mind the NUSAS experience with the formation of the ASB and SASO?

NUSAS is being forced at the present time to re-define its role. Its role is clearly not with blacks - that has been made clear by the black consciousness movement. Yet at the same time it rejects many of the values and attitudes presently dominant in the white society.

This is a new period of growth and change for NUSAS - and the decisions and activities of this year will play a major part in determining the nature of the NUSAS of the 1970's.