

I welcome delegates and observers to the 55th Nusas Congress. This is Nusas's biggest congress ever, and it is numerically three times the size of last year's congress. Much hard work has gone into the preparation and I hope that the congress will be constructively used by delegates. Congress is the most important event in the student government calendar. It is now conventional to open congress by declaring the current congress the most important in the history of Nusas. I will break with that tradition by simply stating that all congresses are the 'most important' in the sense that if any congress fails, then Nusas fails for that year. If the thinking and planning at the congress are loose, arrogant, presumptuous and undirected, then that is how Nusas shall be for the following year. For this reason I shall side-step the rhetoric tonight, which in any event is not my forte, but rather attempt to give some constructive advice.

But first let me make two immediate comments about which I have no doubt.

- A. The failure on the part of this congress to fully understand the National Union's strengths and limitations will result in Nusas's collapse within a year or two.
- B. Secondly, every one of you has the opportunity to influence, control and direct Nusas at this congress. This is not my congress. It is your congress and the National Union is yours. It is not a spectacle, organised for your passive observation. Nusas is not simply a bizarre manifestation of White South Africa. It is an organisation based on co-operation between students, and student leadership, stretched across the campus's - it draws its strength on the strength of that leadership, of that co-operation. It is not like some 'old man river' which just keeps rolling along. Perhaps some of you do feel alienated from the organisation and the history of the organisation (Not having seen its development) nevertheless, its future is in your hands. Thus there is no room for inter-campus bickering and point scoring.

More importantly, if we fail to respond to the major issues of the time, if we, the delegates of the 55th Congress do not locate ourselves in the brutal reality of South Africa 1978, then we push ourselves and our organisation into the oblivion reserved for the irrelevant.

What have we seen in this last year? We saw an attack on "press freedom" and we will never know how effective it was or to what extent news selection for favoured 'safe' issues. I do know that for some time now students have regarded the press to be tame and to generally favour the interests of a mercantile elite. Nonetheless students threw themselves into the defence of this institution. But alas, the same quarters that have been so voluble about the freedom of the press have been absolutely silent on the assault on the student press - perhaps the most threatening and dangerous attack on students ever.

1977 has seen the declaration of the riotous assemblies Act, the banning of public open air meetings, demonstrations and the widespread incarceration and detention of South African citizens. It has seen a sudden increase in the number of deaths in detention, and the banning of 18 organisations which I considered moderate. In short, what has become evident is the intransigence of the Nationalist government to face even the moderate reformist option for South Africa. There has been a super-extension of the repressive apparatus to effect as full a control over the lives of South Africans as possible. And it is in the light of this that we should

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see the attack on student publications. That is; an attempt to regulate the distribution of ideas, the articulation of aspirations and criticisms. No matter how one might struggle to find an alternative epithet to describe this attempt at total control the word fascist is the only one which fits, and it is our duty as an organisation of young creative people bound for good or for worse to the future of this country to continue to articulate the hope, the idea, of another type of society that could be.

It is said that ideas cannot be banned, but to rely on this platitude is complacent and silly. Ideas can be suppressed. Lies can be propagated. It is our duty to resist such suppression and to continue no matter what, to disseminate ideas. It is the greatest role that students can play whether it be through Nusas or through other associations or mediums. But what I especially want to impress on delegates tonight is that this task must be undertaken with discipline. We have a history of half-cocked programmes, ideas not fully thought through and activities that ran out of steam. The year which lies ahead of us is a potentially exciting one, but unless the lessons of 1977 are heeded, no progress will be made. Though these should emerge from the reports, let me draw out the following elements from a brief review.

1976 had been a stagnant, or retrogressive year. Last year's congress was small, divided, uncertain, lacking in confidence and direction, and lacking a year's leadership training. We had to start from scratch; to rise from the ashes like the proverbial phoenix. We also had to find a new modus operandi. The past attempts to intervene politically, the protest campaigns, had taken students no further than pavement politics. We had to realise that only when the implications were fully understood could we intervene politically.

The ethos on the campus's was one of passivity. The internalisation of a crude version of black consciousness had led to academic voyeurism. Hence the introduction of the Africanisation campaign. This was conceived, in brief, as a call to relocation, relevance to the here and now; furthermore it was an attempt to supplement our inadequate university education.

Though this campaign has been subjected to some trite criticisms, there are however some substantial criticisms to be offered. For example, the lack of direction and specificity which allowed all and sundry to claim to be Africanised. From our side we did not want to pre-empt the process of critical enquiry. There was the failure of the Wits student government to pick up the theme and to offer concrete alternatives to its students.

For 1978 I suggest that the primary role of student leadership is the fostering and distribution of constructive ideas and the destruction of the half lies and myths that incarcerate white South Africa. This role is certainly compatible with the vision that Leo Marquard had for Nusas, but it is vital for us all to understand the limitations of working within Nusas and the limitations of being a white student. Limitations, however, do not necessarily diminish the importance of our role. (Recluse idealists have no relevance.) I myself have worked inside and outside Nusas and even favoured individual affiliation, but have come to realise that it is too easy to be destructively critical, too easy to be offended because Nusas is not the vanguard one wants it to be. Aurret van Heerden put it clearly at the labour conference when he said, "Frequently one must sacrifice standing in Geneva for concrete contributions at home." Nusas does have a

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vital role to play. It might not be self-aggrand liberal pronouncement. Nor is it to seek bannings solely for a sense of persecution.

At this point I wish to briefly mention that I do believe that such persecution might well be directed at the political associations. These Associations, avoiding the contradictions of Nusas, play a complementary role to Nusas and I believe it is our duty to realise the importance of these organisations and to provide them with support.

Throughout the next five days of discussion you will be shaping Nusas's activities for the next year and I would like to offer some advice and warnings. I ask you to beware of:

- I opportunism - where strategies and popular appeal determine every direction.
- II academic idealism - which boxes the organisation into a sterile position of hopelessness
- III over-rating (and the under-rating) of your support
- IV presumptuous and self-aggrandising (for example, Nusas cannot act 'on behalf of' blacks, nor should it)
- V short-term strategies. eg. your task is to build both commitment and an understanding of South Africa and not to be a youthful fad.
- VI taking on too much - over-ambition leads to nothing being achieved at all.
- VII lack of discipline, both in terms of the organisation and lifestyle. The principles which we so regularly expose must be taken into our own personal reality. We must give effect to our belief in feminism, our criticism of elitism.

Nusas's role is a difficult one. Very often it seems as though there are no rewards and no progress. I remember Geoff Budlender remarking at an open address how he often felt like giving up, but that if we didn't go on, if we didn't act, we would be forgetting the possibility of freedom at all. I remember Beyers Naude, confronted by despairing students telling them that he had been at it for thirty years and that he certainly wasn't 'giving up'.

Mr Chairman, colleagues, look in disbelief when I express some faith in young people to rise to the challenge of the future. But as regards delegates here, and the new wave of student leadership - I hand over Nusas with total confidence that they will respond positively to the difficult times, difficult decisions which lie ahead, in particular to the fluid challenging reality of South Africa 1978.