

Ripples of Hope

Robert F. Kennedy's Historic 1966 Visit to South Africa Its Significance Then and Now



"So tomorrow's South Africa will be different from today's – just as tomorrow's America will be different from the country I left these few short days ago. Our choice is not whether change will come, but whether we can guide that change in the service of our ideals and toward a social order shaped to the needs of all our people. In the long run we can master change not through force or fear, but only through the free work of an understanding mind – through an openness to new knowledge and fresh outlooks which can only strengthen the most fragile and the most powerful human gifts – the gift of reason."

– Robert F. Kennedy, Wits, 1966



Development and Rights Series: Dialogue 5

The attainment of freedom and democracy in South Africa in 1994 came at a huge price, where many leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada, gave of their lives selflessly, were exiled from their home country, or incarcerated for life. The same was true of countless less well-known South Africans. During the dark days of apartheid, many countries, their leaders and their citizens called for the unbanning of anti-apartheid organisations, the release of political prisoners, and freedom and equality for all.

The USA was one of those countries, along with leading citizens, such as the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., late John F Kennedy, the late Robert F Kennedy, and the Reverend Jesse Jackson. The first American political leader who showed real interest in South Africa was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. By the time of Senator Kennedy's visit in 1966, Dr. King had publicly linked the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. By the early 1960's, Dr. King and Chief Albert Luthuli, banned President of the ANC, had made contact and in 1962 they issued a Joint Statement on apartheid.

Senator Kennedy made a special trip to meet with Chief Luthuli. Dr. King had been invited by NUSAS in 1965, but had been denied a visa by the South African Government.

Dialogue 5 of the Development and Rights Dialogue series is focused on commemorating Africa Month alongside the 50th anniversary of the late Robert F. Kennedy's historic visit to South Africa in 1966, which remains the most important visit by an American during the worst years of apartheid. Senator Kennedy was a strong advocate for liberty, equality, human dignity democracy, human rights and justice. The visit had an enormous impact on black South Africans at a very bleak time in the struggle for human rights in South Africa. It gave a feeling of hope that they were not alone, and that someone important in the outside world knew and cared about what was going on in South Africa. Kennedy's visit, in particular the energy and enthusiasm it generated for the anti-apartheid movement in the U.S., illustrates that many Americans were on the right side of history and reminds us all that efforts in the U.S. made a real contribution to South Africa's fight for justice.

"Each time a man stands up for an idea or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

— Robert F. Kennedy, UCT, 1966

Program

Readings from *Speak Truth to Power: Human Rights Defenders Who Are Changing Our World*
Drama for Life

Quote from the Wits Speech, 1966
Member of the Kennedy family

Welcome Remarks and Introduction of Panel
Deputy Vice Chancellor Tawana Kupe

Brief Remarks by Panelists

Panel Discussion

Audience Questions

Conclusion

Vote of Thanks
Prof. David Everatt, Head: Wits School of Governance

Panel

Tawana Kupe (Panel Chair) – Deputy Vice Chancellor of Wits University

Patrick Gaspard – United States Ambassador to South Africa

Gita Pather – Director, Wits Theatre

Kerry Kennedy – President, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

Kgalema Motlanthe – Former President of the Republic of South Africa

Drama for Life

Drama for Life is a research and postgraduate centre for arts for social transformation and healing at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Drama for Life Theatre Company representatives performing excerpts from *Speak Truth To Power* are:

- Cherae Halley – Actress, theatre-maker, lecturer and applied theatre facilitator
- Nonkululeko Busika – Actress, theatre-maker, lecturer and drama therapist
- Hamish Neill – Actor, director, lecturer and project manager
- Warren Nebe – Director of Drama for Life

More about the Panelists



Patrick Gaspard, United States Ambassador to South Africa

Prior to becoming U.S. Ambassador to South Africa in October 2013, Patrick Gaspard served as the Executive Director of the Democratic National Committee from 2011 to 2013. Previously, he served as an Assistant to the President and Director of the Office of Political Affairs from 2009 to 2011. Prior to that, he was the National Political Director for Obama for America.



Kerry Kennedy, President, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

Kerry Kennedy is the president of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights. For more than thirty years, Kennedy has devoted herself to the pursuit of equal justice, the promotion and protection of basic rights, and the preservation of the rule of law. Kennedy is the author of "Speak Truth to Power: Human Rights Defenders Who Are Changing Our World," which features interviews with human rights activists including Marian Wright Edelman, the Dalai Lama, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.



Gita Pather, Director, Wits Theatre

Gita Pather's career has been multi-faceted, spanning the performing arts, television, arts policy, tertiary education, change management, marketing and communications strategy. She has served in executive managerial capacities for over 30 years at some of South Africa's leading institutions including PACT, the Windybrow Theatre (GM), The Playhouse Company (CEO), and The Market Theatre (COO). A passionate cultural activist, Gita has worked extensively in cultural development in South Africa.



Kgalema Motlanthe, Former President of the Republic of South Africa

Kgalema Petrus Motlanthe was born on July 19, 1949 in Alexandra, Johannesburg. Motlanthe is a former student activist, trade unionist, and member of Mkhonto WeSizwe; the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC). In 1977 he was found guilty of three charges under the Terrorism Act and sentenced to an effective 10 years imprisonment on Robben Island. In 1997, Motlanthe was secretary general of the ANC under the leadership of Thabo Mbeki. Motlanthe also served as deputy president of the party, a position he held from 2007 until 2012.



Panel Chair

Professor Tawana Kupe, Deputy Vice Chancellor Wits University

Professor Tawana Kupe holds BA Hons, MA degrees in Literature Studies and a PhD degree in Media Studies. In 2004, he was appointed as a Head of School of Literature and Language Studies at Wits. Professor Kupe was the Dean of Humanities from 2007 to 2012. In 2013, he was appointed as the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Finance, HR and Transformation.