

The trappings of power

Seemingly oblivious to the rising sea of poverty, the ruling elite is failing to heed the warning of veteran anti-apartheid intellectual 'Rusty' Bernstein

POLITICS IN
COMMAND

S'THEMBISO
MSOMI



IN 1991, three years before South Africa became a democracy, The African Communist — a journal of the South African Communist Party — published what can now be described as a prophetic article.

Penned by veteran anti-apartheid intellectual Lionel "Rusty" Bernstein under his pseudonym, Toussaint, the article asked what made political leaders who earned a reputation for selflessness and incorruptibility during the liberation struggle change when they achieve power.

As the controversy over the R206-million renovations at the president's private home in Nkandla continued to rage on this week, I wondered how different post-apartheid South Africa could have been had Bernstein's comrades heeded his warning.

Drawing from some of the factors that led to the collapse of East European communism and the failures of many post-colonial African states, Bernstein warned the ANC and its allies that they would repeat those mistakes if they refused to learn from them.

"Corroding corruption has not become part of our style. But the subtle process by which the fore-taste of power corrupts seems to be creeping up on us unnoticed. We ignore the warning signals at our peril.

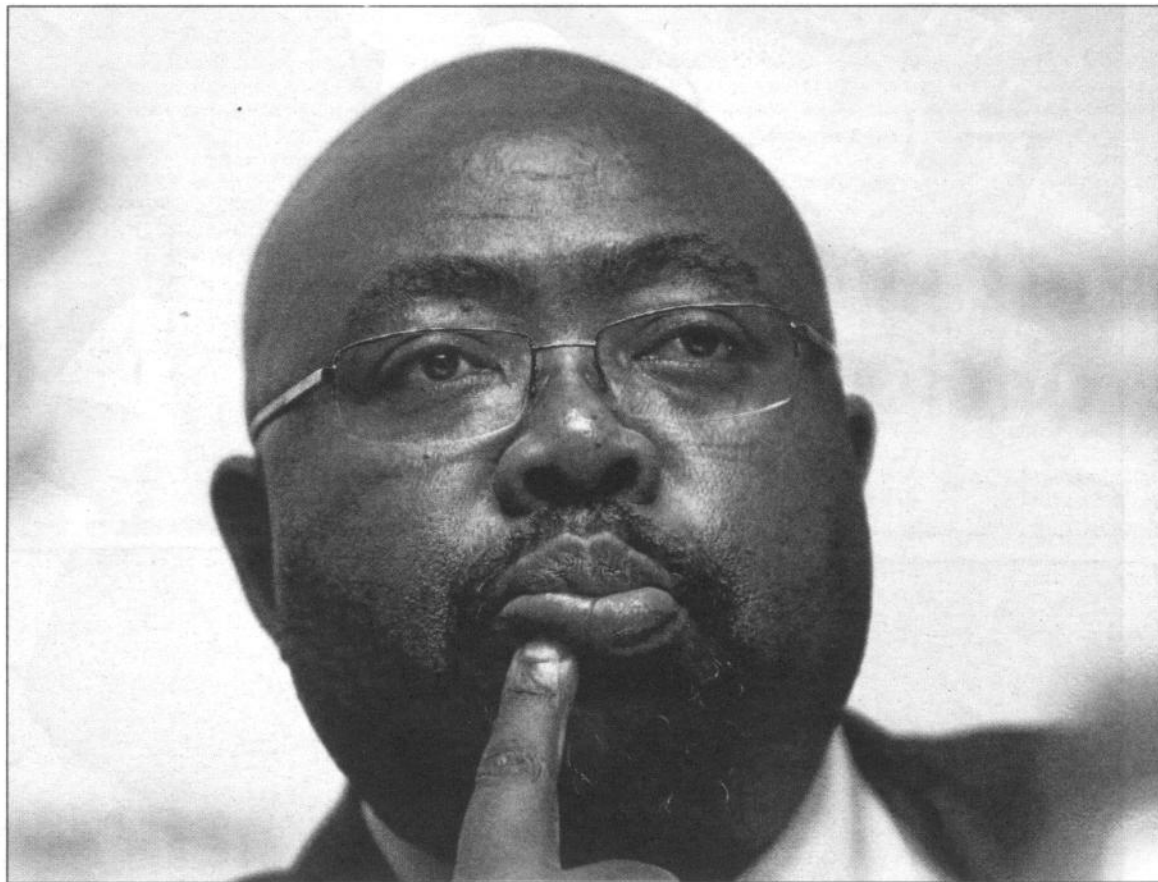
"Unless we can identify and eliminate the factors which have corrupted good, honest leaders and organisations elsewhere, we could well repeat the experience of their decline and fall," Bernstein wrote.

He then told a story of an imaginary struggle hero called "Uncle" to demonstrate how the trappings of power often changed leaders.

Uncle was an "honest, incorruptible and widely respected veteran" of the struggle. But as his party came into power, his lifestyle began to change.

He was given a limousine with a chauffeur because his old car "demeans our movement when he takes it to important functions where everyone else arrives in shiny black limousines".

Later he moved out of his old neighbourhood — where he used to



HOW EASILY WE FORGET: Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi this week explained the Nkandla upgrade. Struggle veteran Lionel Bernstein warned liberation movements against corruption 23 years ago
Picture: ESA ALEXANDER

interact with ordinary people — to settle in a secure "Diplomatic Zone", where his only neighbours were cabinet ministers, ambassadors and senior state officials.

"Now that he no longer takes neighbourhood strolls or lunch-hours in the works canteen, he can learn about the people only from newspapers ... and from reports put on his desk by his personal secretaries and aides," wrote Bernstein.

As the political and economic situation in the country deteriorates, the aides hide the truth from him — preferring to paint a glowing picture of how the new nation is doing.

"The leaders are all, like Uncle, cut off from the people. They no longer know what is really happening or how the ordinary citizens see things," Bernstein continued.

To Bernstein, this allegory helps explain how corruption begins to creep in when leaders are separated from the people they lead.

"That separation lays open even the most honest and dedicated comrade to irresistible pressures in

high office. It explains, in part at least, what they do — and what they fail to do."

Power, to Bernstein, was inseparable from its trappings, and if the ANC hoped to avoid the mistakes that others had made before it, it needed to examine "alternative modes of behaviour and conduct" for the future post-apartheid government.

'The leaders are all, like Uncle, cut off from the people'

apartheid power must be essentially hostile to our cause. They are incompatible with our aim of transforming society to ensure equal rights for all, and contradict the democratic spirit of our programme ... "We dare not wait until our leaders occupy the seats of power before we find alternative ways. We have the opportunity now to debate and reach consensus about alternative modes of behaviour and conduct, which would be suitable for our own

leaders in high places," Bernstein said. But alas, in the euphoria of an imminent victory against an oppressive regime, Bernstein's voice was drowned out and a great opportunity was missed.

Today, political figures who are supposedly steeped in that tradition of selflessness and incorruptibility that Bernstein spoke of see no wrong with splurging excessive amounts of money on the executive just because the ministerial handbook allows them to do so.

The main question for me on the Nkandla saga is not whether the authorities acted within the law when they approved spending R206-million on the upgrading of security at the president's private residence. It is not even whether the contractors conspired to overcharge the state.

My question is: how can Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi, a former trade unionist and the deputy national chairman of the very party Bernstein belonged to, possibly justify spending so much on one individual while the sea of poverty is threatening to engulf so many ordinary people?