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## Now That We're Free

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## Now That We're Free

### Abstract

This month I voted for the first time to choose my own government in South Africa. The exercise of this belated right, when it came, left me numb. Throughout that day I experienced a pause, both of mind and feeling. I have lived in exile for 31 years. Years charged with a restlessness that would not leave me; preoccupied variously with a sense of loss; a loss of country, of friends and relations, of language, and to some degree, a loss of self. So, on the 26th of April 1994, I paused to look back on the years spent in deficiency. However, this could not last for long, for the occasion did not belong to the past, but to the future. The next few days flowed like glue as the whole world waited with baited breath for the results, even though it was a foregone conclusion that the ANC would win. I waited with the world, tense and fearful that the worst, in the form of internecine violence, might yet follow the elections. When South Africa and the world could not wait any longer, the results were declared anyhow. And no one complained about the drawing board results. On the contrary, everyone was satisfied. Well, that is, if you overlooked all the irregularities. Nobody does things quite like South Africans.





Laretta Ngcobo is a South African by birth. She left South Africa twenty-nine years ago and went into political exile. She spent the first six years of her exile in different countries in Africa and then came to live in Britain. Initially she had left her children in South Africa with her mother. Later they were able to join her, as was her husband, and once that happened, it was possible for all of them to live together as a family for the first time in Britain. Laretta was a teacher by profession, and worked as such until a year ago when she retired. She has published two novels, *Cross of Gold* (Longman, 1981) and *And They Didn't Die* (Virago, 1990), as well as several essays on the subject of African women and their concerns. She has also edited an anthology of writing by black women, *Let it be Told*.

LAURETTA NGCOBO

## Now That We're Free

This month I voted for the first time to choose my own government in South Africa. The exercise of this belated right, when it came, left me numb. Throughout that day I experienced a pause, both of mind and feeling. I have lived in exile for 31 years. Years charged with a restlessness that would not leave me; preoccupied variously with a sense of loss; a loss of country, of friends and relations, of language, and to some degree, a loss of self. So, on the 26th of April 1994, I paused to look back on the years spent in deficiency. However, this could not last for long, for the occasion did not belong to the past, but to the future. The next few days flowed like glue as the whole world waited with baited breath for the results, even though it was a foregone conclusion that the ANC would win. I waited with the world, tense and fearful that the worst, in the form of internecine violence, might yet follow the elections. When South Africa and the world could not wait any longer, the results were declared anyhow. And no one complained about the drawing board results. On the contrary, everyone was satisfied. Well, that is, if you overlooked all the irregularities. Nobody does things quite like South Africans.

Then joy exploded and filled the whole country. The fizz still continues now after a month of the momentous elections, cascading waves of exultations from the street parties, the swearing in of the elected members, the inauguration, the opening of Parliament. Everything, as in a dream state, has swept the whole country into the new South Africa. Mandela spoke endlessly of unity, of peace, of reconciliation, as if to make every person in the whole country believe that this was possible, that it was happening, that there was now at last, one country and one people. *'The time for the healing of the wounds has come. The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come. The time to build is upon us... Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all... Today we celebrate not a victory for a party but a victory for all the people of South Africa... South Africans might have their differences, but they are one people with a common destiny in a rich variety of cultures...'*

If the people in the street have not fallen back into the routine of cold reality, I doubt if this can be said of Mandela and his new government. A cold shiver went through those in the know when it was reported, a few days after the new government took over that the Nationalist Government had blown 55 billion rand in their last year. It seemed unreal that this could be the expression of the goodwill they professed. What

squandermania must have possessed them, in the midst of so much need and poverty. It seems clear that while in the pre-election days, Africans were busily engaged in the steamy hot frenzy of Black-kill-Black, the Nationalists were looting the national coffers. What Apartheid debts? And such fat pension provisions for the fat cats of Apartheid! Well, one can't help wondering if the highly vaunted reconciliation hymn is not all sung on one side of the old divide. The African paying the victory tax! Some of us were filled with foreboding when we heard that 'men of stature' like Pik Botha, let alone their underlings, were not that ready to vacate their offices. Well, it makes one wonder. It does not require a particularly astute politician to surmise that the freedom we have just won is only half the coin. It is political, and not economic. That's another battle to be won. The ANC has given up so much in the name of compromise and economic realism. In the face of the many pressures, can Mandela's government legislate against economic domination where that economy and the general know-how are safely in the hands of the private sector. No. Neither are we suggesting that they do. It depends very much on the White South Africans themselves now. If they have truly renounced Apartheid, they must show it in their willingness to share their economic might and skills. If the majority of Africans have been magnanimous in political victory, the white sector must concede much more than they seem willing to do so far.

There is another victory yet to be won, if South Africa must be restored to her space in Africa. The cultural battle. There is no other place in the continent which is less African than South Africa. We have not only lost our heritage, we sometimes betray a sense of shame about our identity. If ever there was one moment that dampened my euphoria on that day of days, Mandela's finest hour, the day of his inauguration, it was when he was sworn in. The Afrikaner who swore in F.W. de Klerk, flew against the trend of the occasion by using Afrikaans. But, for Mandela, it was English. I sincerely feel that in a country where three quarters of his people could not understand English, Mandela should have used his own language, perhaps in addition to English. And I am certain that all other groups would have felt included in that all-embracing moment. Otherwise, the overwhelming taste of victory still lingers in my mind.