

Kenneth Kaunda: The dignity of labour

When one considers the efforts made by Kenneth Kaunda (b. 1924) to attain Zambia's independence, one is able to understand the value that he attributed to work in this May Day speech (1972). In 1953 — as a member of the Zambian ANC — as well as in 1961, Kenneth Kaunda not only sought to dismantle colonialism in his country but also to formulate a new framework for growth. This entailed harnessing rhetorical means which served two purposes, the one ethical, the other political. One could argue that his praise for the ethical and political dimensions of work bear the marks of his Church of Scotland education and of the British Labour tradition of oratory. It is the sort of fiery, expansive rhetoric he displayed during the liberation phase, and formalised as a tool of government afterwards. This May Day speech conjoins two levels of argumentation: judicial as well as deliberative. The judicial elements of the speech are evident through the presence of an accusation, as he indicts obliquely Zambians who do not see work as a dignified, liberatory force so as to, "[enhance] their personal worth and dignity"; he "points a condemning finger" to Zambians who do not emulate by working the ethos of fellow Zambians who were involved in the liberation movement. The deliberative elements in the speech are apparent through the fact that Kaunda indirectly advocates for a work ethic, which will benefit the people as it will lead to the economic growth of Zambia. Although the speech appears to be endorsing a particular work ethic as well as praising the dignity of labour in general it actually functions as a tool through which Kaunda wishes to rally support for policies. In the year the speech was made, the Zambian government formed different economic structures that led to the national ownership of organisations previously owned predominantly by the British, while, in the face of political opposition Kaunda imposed one party rule and had his main rival jailed. Some parties had already been banned in 1964. In essence the speech seeks to capture the moral high ground upon which Kaunda could legitimise both an ethical calling (the dignity of labour) and a tactical political move.

Source

Kenneth Kaunda, *The dignity of labour* (Lusaka: The Cabinet Office/The Government Printer, 1972). Printed as being delivered in Lusaka on Saturday 29 April 1972, although it is a May Day speech. Kaunda dictated all his speeches to his trusted secretary Mrs Gloria Sleep.

References

Stephen N. Esomba, *Zambia under Kaunda's Presidency: The conditions, experiment with Socialism and the final lap to democracy* (Münster: Lit Verlag,

1996): 291.

Richard Seymour Hall, *The high price of principles: Kaunda and the White South* (London: Penguin African Library, 1973): 274-277.

Kenneth David Kaunda, *State of the Nation Vol. I* (Lusaka: Zambia Information Service, 1988).



“There is a perennial nobleness and even a sacredness in work”,
Thomas Carlyle.¹

May Day is Workers' Day. It was set aside as a public holiday in Zambia in honour of the workers of this country and other workers the world over, whose sweat and toil have transformed the face of Zambia and the world, and have changed, for the better, man's environment and his life. It is a day when workers celebrate the success of their efforts to improve the lot of mankind.

This day, therefore, provides the workers with an important opportunity to ponder over the real significance of work in our lives, the very high place which work occupies in the life of our Nation. No man, no nation can exist without work. All growth depends on activity — on work. Even animals have to work to obtain food. In our environment there can be no development, no progress, physical or intellectual, without effort. Effort means work. So work is not a curse; indeed, among human beings it is the most cardinal of the means to manhood and a key factor to the development of our civilisation. The defence of our liberty, freedom and independence means work. The furtherance of the aims of freedom and independence, the realisation of our economic, social and cultural goals, demands hard work.

The greatest asset of any nation is the spirit of its people, its working force; and the greatest danger than can menace any nation is the breakdown of that spirit — the will to work, the will to succeed and the courage and determination to work relentlessly towards greater victories.

No institution, no nation, can be better than the members who comprise it.

It is against this background that we should examine three categories of workers. First, there are those who work primarily for money. In the majority of cases, these people do not care about their contribution to nation-building

¹ From *Past and Present III*, ch. 11 (1843) (editor's note).

or higher productivity. They attach greater importance to their physical presence in offices or factories and in various other places of employment than to the accomplishment of their tasks. They are eager to leave their places of work promptly, regardless of whether or not their work has been completed; yet they do not care how late they report for work. The most important consideration is not so much the completion of their work, but the pay ticket at the month-end and what they are able to buy with it. Their philosophy is simply minimum effort at work and maximum benefit and leisure time. They are a menace to society. Regrettably, there are many of those people in Zambia. The result is that the greatest burden of the work of bringing about improvement in our economic and social life which the nation enjoys is being shouldered by the few dedicated, courageous and hard-working men, women and youths.

In the second category are people who do not merely or primarily work for money but rather for the improvement of their conditions and those of their fellow men. During the struggle for independence, quite a considerable number of people worked hard and made sacrifices, without regard to returns either for themselves or their families, in support of the national cause. The main objective in the selfless act of participation in the struggle was to help realise the wishes and desires, not only of a few individuals in the leadership, but all the people, who indeed, today, enjoy the benefits of freedom and prosperity in an Independent Zambia. This includes people who opposed the Independence struggle.

Today, there are many men and women in politics, in various branches of the Public Service, commerce and industry and the Church who genuinely believe in hard work and long hours of work, completely out of proportion to the remuneration at the end of the month. They believe that certain tasks have to be performed in order that the Nation can satisfy its needs; work on such tasks has to be done strenuously and successfully. Work done for delight, is done heartily. In whatever case, the success of the workers depends on their spirit and the will to succeed.

Many Church workers, for example, have come out with an unequivocal commitment to join the Party and Government in their efforts to improve our economic and social conditions. This is in realisation of their special responsibility to, and their role in society. These and other workers in many charitable and non-charitable, but productive organisations, are among the most important determinants of the pace of progress in the Nation.

The degree of interdependence among workers demanded by our fast-changing economic life must drive every worker to greater effort to ensure

higher productivity. No worker can succeed alone without the support of others, be they farmers or workers in offices, factories, mines and in many other areas of economic, social and political life. The size of our national cake depends upon the co-operative efforts of all workers in every sphere of life. Miners are vital to our economy, but they need food from farmers, who in turn need fertiliser and other supplies from factory workers, just as they need guidance from trained planners and extension workers. All workers also need guaranteed freedom, peace, and public health and other services to enable them to produce without let or hindrance.

In a Humanist society, conscientious workers must always consider the interests of other fellow workers and members of society in general and the harm done to them through irresponsible behaviour such as laziness, drunkenness at work, or illegal strikes which can bring development to a grinding halt.

There is a third category of workers who do not only consider work as a service to society but also as an instrument for enhancing their personal worth and dignity.

Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical letter "On the development of peoples", has dealt with a very important dimension of work in the context of "the vocation to self-fulfilment". This dimension of work is never fully and seriously given due emphasis by us the workers. Pope Paul has said:

In the design of God, every man is called upon to develop and fulfil himself, for every life is a vocation. At birth, everyone is granted, in germ, a set of aptitudes and qualities for him to bring to fruition. Their coming to maturity, which will be the result of education received from the environment and personal efforts, will allow each man to direct himself toward the destiny intended for him by his Creator. Endowed with intelligence and freedom, he is responsible for his fulfilment as he is for his salvation. He is aided, or sometimes impeded, by those who educate him and those with whom he lives, but each one remains, whatever be these influences affecting him, the principal agent of his own success or failure. By the unaided effort of his own intelligence and his will, each man can grow in humanity, can enhance his personal worth, can become more a person.

This is fundamental in our Humanist philosophy. We must regard work as part of the process of improving man's inherent qualities; we must regard work as the process of man's efforts to become a better man "to enhance his

personal worth, to become more a person". Work is, in this case, both an instrument and part of the process of self-fulfilment. Looking at it from this angle, there is nobleness and a sacredness in work. There is, therefore, reason to derive joy from work. There is reason to do much more than we are required by, say, regulations, even beyond normal working hours, if only to improve our creative powers and our capacity to solve even more difficult problems in life.

Even from an intellectual point of view, one does not mature in intellect and wisdom who does not gain more knowledge and experience through the interaction of ideas and creative efforts which work involves. We should be happy to accept more responsibility and to discharge it efficiently and effectively as a demonstration of our personal worth and usefulness to society.

Every worker is, therefore, at the service of the Nation and must take pride in contributing to national fulfilment through personal success and the success of all the workers of Zambia. Workers must lead a purposeful life. For, a life without a purpose is like that of a tree; it vegetates; it is without a sense of value and direction.

So as we, the workers of Zambia, celebrate May Day, it is opportune also to remember the real meaning and importance of our various institutions of employment and to the Nation as a whole. We must celebrate the success of our efforts and not our failures. A moment's stoppage through a strike, official or unofficial, means a halt in progress either in material welfare, or in the process of self-fulfilment. In the final analysis, the worker is the loser. We must not be a nation of beggars, nor a beggar nation. A beggar is without dignity or self-respect. National decency, national dignity and national respect and prosperity all depend entirely on the success of our creative efforts and hard work to maintain the highest possible level of production of goods and services which constitute our national cake. We must aim at a fair distribution of wealth and not poverty. But there can be no distribution of wealth if no wealth is produced through work. There can be no improvement of economic and social conditions except through increased and continuous production of commodities and services. The attainment of maximum social justice in a Humanist society only takes meaning in the context of higher productivity and fair distribution all round in our national institutions.

We have no choice, as a young Nation landlocked and surrounded by hostile forces, but to work very hard for national survival and national fulfilment. Drunkenness, road accidents, indiscipline, laziness, selfishness, exaggerated feelings of self-importance; ignorance and disease are among the worst

~ Kenneth Kaunda ~

enemies of our society. They frustrate the efforts of selfless, dedicated workers. We must fight with a will to win. We cannot afford to lose. Our first victory against the enemy lies in the unity of purpose and action to build a free, strong and prosperous Zambia. This is the call of the Nation and all workers in each and every institution, in all corners of Zambia, must answer it positively and effectively.

We Zambians are all workers, whoever and whatever we are. We are the vanguard of our Revolution. The destiny of this Nation lies in our hands; we must accept full responsibility for shaping today the Zambia of tomorrow which is our children's heritage. Indeed the real success of our democracy rests in our triumph in breaking the chains of economic and social bondage among the majority of the Zambian people. This is a national cause, as important as the struggle for political independence. It is a daily and continuous challenge for every patriotic worker.

This must, therefore, be a day of reflection and rededication to our cause of building a free, strong and prosperous Zambia, through sweat and toil, under our national motto "One Zambia, One Nation".



Introduced, with editorial revisions, by Lethiwe Nkosi.