

Comment by Michael C H Jones  
9th December 2013

How is a man to be judged by history? Whether he be the most esteemed leader or the most innocuous commoner? So much depends on talent, character, circumstance and opportunity. What weight should be given to family, organisational support, other men, the times etc? There is no job description for nation building. Mandela is considered virtually universally as a "saint" among men, whereas others like Hitler, Stalin and Mao are definitely in Western eyes branded as "sinners". The religious connotations of current eulogies cannot be missed. In media throughout the world, including this Colombo, Sri Lanka piece headed " Nelson Mandela's legacy to the World ...", Mandela is being lauded as "Jesus-like" in his attributes and achievements.

Yet I restrain my personal judgement, if only because the nation building in South Africa and its meaning for Africa, the Indian Ocean and world beyond, remains a work in progress and hence Mandela's leadership and judgements a) during his 5 short years as South African President, 1994-99, b) active political negotiations from prison release to retirement, 1990-2004, or c) even ANC freedom struggles prior to and during incarceration, 1956-1990, require a much longer time span after death for proper evaluation. His legacy is dependent on what happens in South Africa from say 2005 to 2045 - a period of at least 30/40 years if not longer. The opinions of Western, Capitalist, essentially White, Democracies are not omniscient. The fate of the South African black majority will be the true barometer of Mandela's legacy for the world.

Personally I have mixed emotions at Mandela's ultimate death. I come from a family totally opposed to the Afrikaner takeover of power in South Africa in 1948, we remember well those in Australia who supported that racist regime during the 40 years to Mandela's release in 1990. Much writing about the Soviet Union and Peoples Republic of China, but little on South Africa until PM Malcolm Fraser provided resolute leadership during the late 1970s thereby seriously embarrassing conservatives in this country. I remember the anguish I caused by associating with the SNCC and CORE in New York USA during early 1965 and my first arrest outside the Chase Manhattan Bank in March protesting for the release of Nelson Mandela. I remember the rage from the Australian public during 1971 when we disrupted the Springbok Rugby Tour. Sitting in the old Sheridan Stand at the Sydney Cricket Ground under a hail of beer cans whilst body-guarding Bishop Edward Crowther in his purple cassock. It certainly was not a friendly crowd. Especially when I cheered to the heavens my wife Janice as she ran with the Burgmann sisters to the middle of the Sydney Cricket Ground, and sat down in the middle of the Springbok-Wallaby scrum - as usual she was escorted like Queen Elizabeth 11 by the police from the field and was front page of every newspaper in the country. Personally I liked the photos in the Bulletin, very surreal. She defended herself in court and won.

The anti-apartheid struggle gained momentum from that tour until by the early 1980s the international trade and especially financial sanctions kicked in and the racist regime of South Africa was on the ropes. Yet in Australia the conservatives would not relent and particularly the business community with vested interests. I know because it took me almost 2 years during 1988/89 to get 25 companies in Sydney to commit to the establishment of the Australia Southern African Business Council (ASABC) - this was prior to the release of Nelson Mandela. My argument was that he would be released and that we ought to start thinking about and taking action to shore-up the Economy of South Africa so that the ANC when in power would have a country to govern. Even Janice had doubts and there were so many fierce arguments about strategy. But I said that I had walked down the street with Communists during the anti-Vietnam War campaigns of the 1960s and hence should be prepared to similarly associate with Racists for the cause of liberating South Africa. Ultimately I was the Founding President for nearly four years and led the Council's business negotiations with Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu during their visits to Australia.

The meetings with both were memorable, one hour twenty minutes one-on-one with Mandela, and three hours with teams in the case of Sisulu. I did not find Mandela in 1990 as awe inspiring as he became once elected President of South Africa in 1994. They say if you look into a man's eyes you can see his heart. I only spent 3/4 months in prison in four sentences during the late 1960s over Refusal to Register for the Draft/Conscription and I did not like it, especially being paraded and bashed in the main section of Long Bay Jail. So I have some legitimate shudders over 27 years incarceration. But I remember looking hard at him and wondering about what he was saying. Obviously he was "playing" to the Australian business community as his country desperately needed aid, trade and investments. But there was more than just a tactical difference, in part derived from our unbridgeable cultural and life experience differences. Mandela was for short term reconciliation in the Chinese sense - 50 years. I had and still have my doubts - you cannot negotiate with "evil" - ignorance perhaps and even self-interest. In forgiving the sins of the "white man" did he sentence to failure the ANC? So many of their best people including myself walked away over the last decade. The Black man has to be economically empowered to enable him to find his own political self-determination.

I decided to stick with China. Li Peng may have been the "Butcher of Beijing" at Tiananmen Square in June 1989 but look at the progress in the PRC to 2014. South Africa has been a disappointment. Corruption may be equally rampant in both countries but China's urbanisation and raising more than 500/600 million people from poverty has been awe inspiring and arguably the greatest event in human history. Who is to judge the greater men in the ANC and CPC?