

## JASA: THE RADICALISATION OF A UNIVERSITY STAFF ASSOCIATION, 1983–1984

by Christopher Merrett

A STAFF association would not ordinarily attract much historical attention even in an institutional history.<sup>1</sup> But the Joint Academic Staff Association (JASA) of the University of Natal achieved notoriety in 1983 for affiliating to the national anti-apartheid movement, the United Democratic Front (UDF), which endorsed the Freedom Charter of 1955.<sup>2</sup> This unusual, perhaps unique, move was encouraged by heightened opposition to apartheid and the increasingly unlawful and repressive actions of the government. By the early 1980s, the regime was using death squads and vigilante groups in ways normally associated with Latin America.<sup>3</sup>

On 19 April 1983 at JASA's AGM, an executive committee was elected that indicated a distinctly leftward shift.<sup>4</sup> Many of the incoming members were involved in off-campus community organisations of a radical tendency and they included a formerly banned person, Fatima Meer. Informal discussions that started in Durban with H.M. (Jerry) Coovadia, a paediatrician at Medical School and UDF activist, resulted in a proposal in August from Christopher Ballantine (Music) that JASA should become a UDF affiliate.<sup>5</sup> The UDF was a broad front of organisations that shared opposition to apartheid and a number of basic principles. Founded at Selbourne Hall in Johannesburg on 23



*University of Natal march down Church Street to the City Hall, Pietermaritzburg, 2 June 1983. In the front row from left to right: Peter Booyesen, Alan Paton, Desmond Clarence and Deneys Schreiner*

January 1983, it was committed to non-racial democracy and socio-economic reform. Its immediate concern was a range of proposed legislation known as the Koornhof Bills that would introduce a new constitution setting up a tripartite parliamentary system that excluded Africans entirely.<sup>6</sup>

More immediately, events directly linked to education had engaged JASA's attention in the form of the Universities Amendment Bill. This opened up white universities to black students subject to a race-based quota system to be applied by the universities themselves. This was regarded as inflammatory legislation: apart from matters of principle, it was feared that academic decisions could now be misread as racial. A JASA meeting on 26 May 1983 was addressed by local academic Douglas Irvine (Politics) and Michael Savage from UCT and on 2 June a university assembly was held in the City Hall, Pietermaritzburg, after a march down Church Street led by Alan Paton. In early August in response to a circulated petition, the JASA Executive endorsed non-compliance with the intended law, although as Executive member Raymond Wacks (Law) noted the statute was worded in an ambivalent way. It did, however, add to the weight of legislation inhibiting academic freedom.<sup>7</sup>

There was further internal consternation and concern expressed by JASA because the university had not seen fit to consult Senate, the Academic Freedom Committee – or JASA. This led to a special general meeting (SGM) of the association on 24 August. Consequently, the fear of a deal being done with the government was raised on 26 August in a letter from JASA to the Principal.<sup>8</sup> He did not react well, complaining about 'many destructive criticisms' while the

JASA response was that it was 'upholding ... democratic principles'.<sup>9</sup> On 14 September the university community was told that an exemption from quotas had been secured as long as overall growth of student numbers did not exceed 4%.<sup>10</sup>

The JASA Executive, impressed by the UDF affiliation proposal, recommended that it should go ahead, but referred the matter to special general meetings to be held in both centres on 20 September. Some members in Pietermaritzburg called for a secret ballot; or alternatively a postal ballot, but this latter suggestion was defeated 74-27 with one abstention. Predictably, most of those present were sympathetic to the argument that failure to attend meetings means that influence is forfeit and that complex issues require debate. The usual show of hands prevailed with the result that the two meetings affirmed affiliation 77-27 with a single abstention.<sup>11</sup> On 23 September a letter requesting affiliation was sent to Coovadia and confirmed in writing by Y. Mahomed (provincial UDF secretary) the following day.

The counter-arguments were predictable: a staff association should remain neutral and avoid politicisation. The matter of neutrality was later dealt with by Coovadia when he pointed out that the University of Natal's involvement with the Buthelezi Commission had not been opposed by the anti-UDF faction.<sup>12</sup> Apparently blind to the innately political nature of a conservative position, opponents of affiliation on 22 September requisitioned a review of the decision arguing that it was invalid in terms of rule 8 of JASA's constitution, the aims and objectives of the association. The supporters of the requisition, organised by Paul Thompson (History),

drew support from his immediate colleagues, and staff from Afrikaans en Nederlands, Agriculture, Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry; 29 JASA members in all.

Matters came to a head on 13 October at a meeting in the Education/Psychology Lecture Theatre on the Pietermaritzburg campus. Thompson and Ian Behrmann (Agricultural Economics) put forward a motion arguing that affiliation to the UDF was invalid because it was a political move not directly related to the collective professional interests of JASA members. The counter-argument was that further entrenchment of apartheid in South African education constituted the greatest crisis since the Orwellian Extension of University Education Act (1959) and that this was very much a matter of professional interest. While rule 8 disallowed aligning JASA with a political party, the UDF was a political broad front and not a party.<sup>13</sup> It also promoted the further interests of higher education in general as well as the university, staff and students. The meeting was superficially civil, but this covered up simmering tensions. The motion was defeated 89-43 with 5 abstentions; in other words, 64% of those at the meeting supported affiliation.

In its wake, about two dozen resignations were recorded, mainly in Pietermaritzburg; together with an equal number of staff signing up on the grounds that JASA was recognising the wider world that conservatives wished to deny. Linda Haines (Mathematics) conceded in her resignation letter that JASA had not acted unconstitutionally, but disrespected the views of some members and abandoned an 'unwritten code which embodies harmony and goodwill'. The Executive had pola-

rised JASA by finding no room for compromise.<sup>14</sup> Nigel Wolstenholme (Horticulture) referred to 'politicisation and misrepresentation'. And Ray Haines (Chemistry) argued impractically that JASA 'must represent views of all of its members'.<sup>15</sup> At least one of those resigning admitted to a sense of embarrassment fearing being seen as pro-apartheid. By way of response the JASA chair Colin Gardner acknowledged that the association had made an 'unusual and controversial move', but justified UDF affiliation because of the government's racial fragmentation and denationalisation of Africans.<sup>16</sup> He responded personally to Ray Haines by asking why opponents of affiliation did not attend meetings. He also referred to Senate and Council condemnation of apartheid.<sup>17</sup>

The campaign to nullify the affiliation was well orchestrated. Thompson conducted what he termed a 'JASA constitutional campaign' and lobbying was highly organised. Indeed, he suggested to the JASA chairperson that some financial assistance might come his way, although it is very doubtful if this happened. He was incensed by a personal letter written by this author to about 40 JASA members describing those opposed to UDF affiliation as part of a 'rightist onslaught'. The chairperson dismissed Thompson's complaint as outside any informal undertakings; and the allegation that the letter was libelous. Thompson's notes about prior planning for the meeting of 13 October involve where requisitioners should sit, recommend 'play[ing] for time' and then forcing a vote at about 21h00. His notes on the Executive meeting held two days beforehand record 'A sense of complaisancy [*sic*] in the meeting wh[ich] I would interpret as confidence

in the Durban people's powers to move the meeting as they wish, i.e. to sustain affiliation.' Was he referring to the generous, and possibly reckless, proviso that staff could join the association at the door before the meeting for 50c?

There were other conflicts. Over the weekend of 28–30 October 1983, an Inkatha invasion of the Ngoye campus of the University of Zululand (UZ) led to the deaths of four students at the hands of Inkatha in spite of the presence of ninety police. One of the instigators of the violence was a History lecturer. Students had been attempting to stop a speech by Mangosuthu Buthelezi commemorating Cetshwayo but a court interdict had not been granted. The James Commission was appointed to look into the violence. On 15 November, a JASA Executive meeting was addressed by two UZ lecturers, A. Ndlovu and Garnet Mazibuko (Geology) who were involved in attempts to establish a non-racial staff association. A JASA media statement expressed 'shock and horror at recent events' condemning 'any form of violent intervention in the life of a university'. Solidarity was expressed but crucially the statement called for the resignation of Inkatha leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi as chancellor of UZ. It was supported by twelve Executive members and opposed by four with a single abstention. Opponents were the same individuals who had tried to reverse UDF affiliation. Buthelezi attacked white lecturers with 'supremacist' views at University of Natal.<sup>18</sup> After this episode, UZ students were required to sign a pledge disavowing criticism of Inkatha, Buthelezi or the university.<sup>19</sup>

JASA remained affiliated to the UDF, but the controversy was far from over. At the Executive meeting of 21 No-

vember 1983, straw polls were held on various possible changes to the constitution and the issue was held over until the AGM of 1984. But on 20 January 1984, Thompson submitted a requisition aimed at changing JASA's rules so as to achieve 'greater democratisation and credibility.' This proposed that Executive committee members be elected on a centre basis, that separate AGMs be held and that postal ballots should be allowed. In other words, this was a thinly disguised breakaway attempt. It appears that the chair of JASA, Colin Gardner, suggested to Thompson that he was trying to stage a coup, a notion the latter rejected as preposterous.

Thompson's views were given good coverage that included a long, published interview. He was open that he was aiming for separation within the staff association in the hope that the Pietermaritzburg component would prove more conservative. This was encouraged by his belief that of the net gain in JASA membership (14 – after 25 resignations and 39 additions) most of it was Durban-based. He also voiced scepticism of meetings and objected to the Executive's 'imposition of political methods'.<sup>20</sup>

A SGM was duly called, but its location now became a matter of contention. The requisitioners, nearly all from Pietermaritzburg, believed they had a right to demand that the SGM be held in their home base. But convention demanded that meetings alternate, requiring that Durban be the venue. The vote at the Executive meeting of 21 February was 6-5 in favour of the latter with 3 abstentions.<sup>21</sup> Thompson's personal notes dated a week before record a populist belief that elitists were 'taking away the initiative' and manipulating the system: there is a bitter reference to a 'swindle'

with radicals embracing tradition to undermine democracy. There is also clear animosity towards Durban staff.

On 15 March 1984 a Separate General Meeting (confusingly also a SGM) was held in Pietermaritzburg to discuss the requisition. Great effort was put into publicity by the Executive to encourage attendance. The meeting itself was not noted for good temper. A federal structure for JASA was supported by conservatives as a means of deflecting a radical takeover of both centres, so that the association 'could represent interests properly'. They wanted to 'restor[e] JASA to the wider body of lecturers [and] JASA's credibility'. It was argued that the 'political methods' of the Executive ignored the mass of members and that the university administration would cease to take JASA seriously. This was improbable as the association represented 60% of staff, including 81% of those in the Arts Faculty in Pietermaritzburg and 98% in Durban.<sup>22</sup>

The crunch SGM was held in Durban on 19 March. It was not particularly well-attended. Two motions put to the vote about constitutional change were defeated by 41-28 and 50-15 with a handful of abstentions. The following day Thompson resigned from JASA. In his papers there is an undated and very detailed proposed constitution for a University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) Academic Staff Association. It stresses that it would be an association for 'scholars' to be run ultimately by referenda and postal ballots. This was the conservative vision of democracy, but the proposal was never widely publicised and came to naught.

In a valedictory interview as JASA chairperson in 1985, Colin Gardner agreed that the UDF affiliation had

been controversial and 'unusual'. He felt JASA had reacted 'appropriately and creatively to current university and national events'. He noted pride in what JASA had done and felt that history would judge it kindly, living up to its responsibilities as lobbyist and think-tank.<sup>23</sup>

Those who opposed affiliation to the UDF had varying motives. But a common one behind the appeals to consensus and professional unity, often wrapped up in anti-apartheid protestations, was a prevalent attitude among whites. They were desperate to maintain their privileged position in the face of looming and threatening change. Consorting with perceived radicals endangered this precarious situation.

When the incoming Executive committee for 1985 was elected and publicised, Thompson annotated his copy of the names: 'liberal religious [illegible]', 'radical feminist divorcée', 'communist', 'radical probably communist', 'radical', 'non-tenured' and 'non-academic (librarian) and socialist'.<sup>24</sup> This is not just of passing interest. It illustrated a particular conservative mind-set and a sense of superiority common among some academics. But he had gone to enormous lengths, encouraged by like-minded colleagues who ultimately failed to support him, to thwart UDF affiliation. This was always likely to be largely symbolic, a gesture of solidarity, and there was no reason to believe that JASA would stop promoting the interests of staff, as indeed proved to be the case. Were his actions simply the product of conservative inclinations, an obsessive personality and a rigid, legalistic mind? It seemed so at the time, but his archival papers do raise further questions.

These are heightened by subsequent developments on the Durban campus. In the late 1980s a compatriot of Thompson's and also an historian, Charles Ballard, became a paid South African Police Special Branch (SB) informer; PN5377 also known as Ron. He walked in off the street and his handler, Brian Morrow, believes he worked for the SB out of political conviction as well as for money. His membership of JASA was appreciated by the SB and 'he provided information relating to staff and administrative activities'.<sup>25</sup> Was there a Ron on the Pietermaritzburg campus during JASA's UDF-affiliation controversy of 1983–1984? The university was heavily infiltrated by informers, but in Pietermaritzburg it was generally assumed they would be found in the student body. Philip Powell, later an armourer for Inkatha, was the obvious example. On 15 May 1984, a UDF rally was held in the Students Union and addressed by Kate Philip (NUSAS), Helen Joseph and Mosioua Lekota (UDF). JASA was represented on the stage and in the middle of that night there were threatening phone calls.

During the second half of the 1980s JASA successfully combined educational and political activism and staff concerns as envisaged by those who wanted to make the association more relevant in terms of broader society. For example, an Executive meeting held on 3 September 1985 (when a partial national State of Emergency was in force, but not in Natal) dealt with bail money for four Durban students; supported a proposal by the Black Students Society for a shutdown on the day of the murdered Victoria Mxenge's funeral and provided R50 towards transport to Mlazi; offered assistance after a raid on Alan Taylor Residence, and urged

attendance at a Pietermaritzburg placard demonstration.<sup>26</sup> There was growing co-ordination with student bodies with a two-day stoppage on 26–27 September involving protest activity and a programme of alternative lectures on 9 October. People associated with the university were beginning to be detained, for example Paddy Kearney of the Centre for Adult Education advisory board under section 29 of the Internal Security Act. Support was also offered to the Federal Theological Seminary at Imbali should it fail to reopen.

Affiliation to the UDF put JASA in a stronger position to engage with organisations such as the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) and the National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA). It was pointed out that the deployment of troops to the townships could result in a white lecturer or student shooting at a black student.<sup>27</sup> Many of JASA's Medical School members were active in the non-racial NAMDA.

Bread-and-butter issues mingled with broader matters such as censorship, the international academic boycott, the national education crisis and the country-wide State of Emergency imposed from 12 June 1986, deportations of University of Bophuthatswana staff from the bantustan and growing contact with the African National Congress on JASA Executive meeting agendas. Ironically, the association was to disaffiliate, in 1987 by 26-3 with fifteen abstentions, from the Committee of University Teachers Associations (CUTA), which had historically concerned itself with staff salaries, status and service conditions. Dissatisfaction stemmed from its double failure to address pressing political issues or act as an effective trade union. Instead, considerable effort was



put into setting up a new progressive staff association that was to become the Union of Democratic University Staff Associations (UDUSA).<sup>28</sup>

For all its internal conflict over several years, JASA had emerged on the right side of history.

## NOTES

- 1 Papers relating to JASA are housed in the University of KwaZulu-Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg at ST9/1-3. JASA's newsletter, *Shoptalk*, is at ST 9/2/1-.
- 2 JASA had been founded on 22 October 1979 by the amalgamation of the academic staff association and the lecturers' association. It retained a Lecturers' Standing Committee; and lecturers' representatives on Senate (four) were ex-officio members of JASA.
- 3 Nicholas Haysom, *Mabangalala: The Rise of Right-Wing Vigilantes in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, 1986 - Occasional Paper; 10).
- 4 At this AGM professional librarians were admitted to JASA's membership. This writer was almost simultaneously elected as secretary. In handing over, the outgoing secretary, David Newmarch, remarked 'Don't worry, nothing much happens and the year will gradually unfold' (or words to that effect). He could not have been more mistaken. AGM discussion had already included the potentially controversial issue of student residence integration and a threatened boycott of lectures on 1 June.
- 5 Jerry Coovadia to Christopher Ballantine, 15 August 1983.
- 6 Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000).
- 7 Raymond Wacks, 'Quota ...?' *Shoptalk* 1 (October 1983).
- 8 Colin Gardner and David Maughan Brown to Desmond Clarence, 26 August 1983.
- 9 Desmond Clarence to David Maughan Brown, 13 September 1983; David Maughan Brown to Desmond Clarence, 20 September 1983.
- 10 Desmond Clarence to staff, 14 September 1983. JASA's wider concerns were nevertheless published in David Maughan Brown, 'The Quota Act and academic isolation', September 1983.
- 11 *Shoptalk* 1 (October 1983).
- 12 Report by Nalini Naidoo and Frank Meintjies in *Natal Witness*, 19 October 1983. The Buthelezi Commission sat in 1982, gathered an impressive amount of data and opinion, and advocated a consociational system for South Africa.
- 13 Ironically, given its non-racial membership it could not possibly be a political party in South Africa in terms of the Prohibition of Political Interference Act (1968), which had killed the Liberal Party.
- 14 Linda Haines to Colin Gardner, 17 October 1983.
- 15 Ray Haines to Colin Gardner, 27 October 1983.
- 16 Colin Gardner, 'JASA and the UDF' *NU Digest* 4(9) October 1983.
- 17 Colin Gardner to Ray Haines, 28 October 1983.
- 18 *Daily News*, 23 November 1983.
- 19 Heather Hughes, 'Violence at Ngoye' *Shoptalk* 2 (January 1984), pp. 7-8.
- 20 'JASA: how democratic?' *Shoptalk* 2 (January 1984), pp. 1-4.
- 21 Some of the voting was highly and subtly tactical.
- 22 There were 247 academic staff in Pietermaritzburg and 491 in Durban (including Medical School) of whom 157 and 301 respectively were JASA members. Total membership in Pietermaritzburg was 170 and in Durban 304 (the additional members were so-called non-academic). The association had come a long way from the 37 members present at the inaugural AGM just over four years before.
- 23 *Shoptalk* 7 (August 1985), pp. 2-5. Gardner would become an ANC councillor in the Msunduzi Municipality and after retirement from the University of Natal its speaker until 2006. Disillusionment had set in after the removal of Thabo Mbeki. See Mary Gardner, *The Constant Gardner: A Memoir of Colin Oxenham Gardner, Anti-Apartheid Activist and Academic* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Society Foundation Trust, 2023).
- 24 *Shoptalk* 7 (August 1985). This writer was labelled as the socialist [*sic*] librarian.
- 25 Laurence Piper and Brian Morrow, *To Serve and Protect: The Inkathagate Scandal* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010), pp. 23-25.
- 26 The ATR raid of Sunday 18 August 1985 involved hundreds of police who kicked down doors in an action described by Peter Booysen, the Principal, as 'reprehensible'. A Durban student march protesting against the partial State of Emergency had led to 34 arrests but Pietermaritzburg police were more restrained. A second rush-hour picket in Durban Road had involved fifty students and

seven JASA members (Christopher Merrett, 'State of Emergency' *Shoptalk* 8 (September 1985), p. 4).

27 Fidela Fouché, 'End Conscription Campaign' *Shoptalk* 8 (September 1985), p. 3.

28 UDUSA also replaced the University Teachers Association of South Africa (UTASA). See *Shoptalk* 13 (June 1987) and 15 (March 1988).