

South Africa's Freedom Charter campaign holds lessons for the pursuit of a fairer society

By Benjamin Roberts

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The [Freedom Charter](#), the document that became the blueprint for a free South Africa, turns 65 this year.

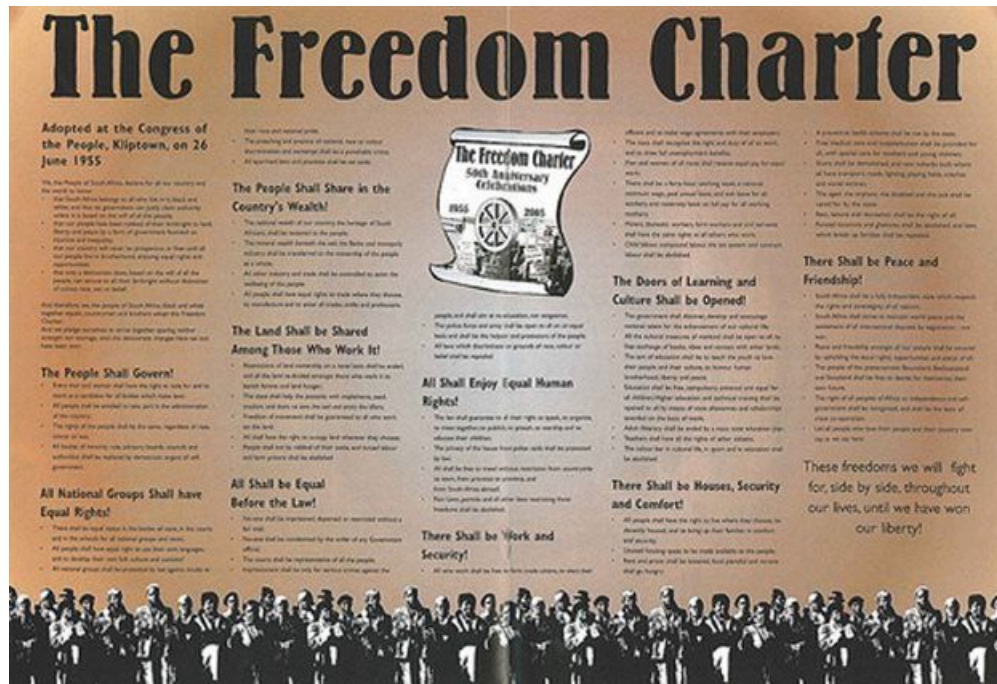


Image source: [South African History Online](#)

It was adopted by the [Congress of the People](#) in Kliptown, Soweto, on 26 June 1955. The meeting brought together several organisations and individuals allied to the liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC).

Much has been written about the [enduring significance of the document](#). This includes its vision for a just social and economic order, its influence on South Africa's widely celebrated [Constitution](#), and the degree to which changes in the country since the end of apartheid in 1994 have [lived up to the ideals](#) of the charter.

Less attention has been devoted to the underlying process of collecting, collating and representing the voices of ordinary South Africans in preparing the Freedom Charter. This article briefly reflects on this process.

It argues that this exercise remains a pioneering effort directed at capturing mass opinion and using it as a broad

framework to inform public policy. Every generation of South Africans has its own “Freedom Charter moment”, when fundamental questions are asked about the type of society desired, and the true meaning of freedom.

Today, the Freedom Charter campaign process holds lessons concerning the importance of inclusive, bottom-up governance and active citizenship as the basis for addressing the challenges, needs and aspirations of South Africans across gender, class, generational and other lines.

Genesis of a vision

The Congress of the People idea was put forward by [Professor ZK Matthews](#), president of the ANC in the Cape, at a provincial conference of the organisation in August 1953. He maintained that [the time had come for](#)

“convening a national convention, a congress of the people, representing all the people of this country irrespective of race or colour, to draw up a Freedom Charter for the democratic South Africa of the future.”

This proposal was adopted, and subsequently endorsed by the ANC national conference in [December 1953](#).

Planning of the congress campaign was organised through the Congress Alliance, comprising the National Action Council of the ANC, [South African Indian Congress](#), [South African Coloured People's Organisation](#) and the [South African Congress of Democrats](#).

The Congress of the People campaign process was mapped out at a meeting of the alliance in March 1954. This entailed the establishment of provincial committees, followed by committees at workplaces, villages and black urban residential areas, known as [townships](#).

At the heart of the process was the recruitment of a vast corps of “freedom volunteers” to inspire awareness of the congress and to collect demands for incorporation into the charter.

The will of all the people

In the months that followed, a tide of rallies, meetings, and door-to-door canvassing took place. This led to thousands of public demands

“flooding in to COP headquarters, on sheets torn from school exercise books, on little dog-eared scraps of paper, on slips torn [from COP leaflets](#).”

The demands were written in multiple languages, and varied in style from pithy one-liners to wordier contributions, including the odd essay. Sadly, only a small set of the individual demands have been preserved in archives.

In April 1955, while final logistics for the Kliptown event were under way, the subcommittees of the National Action Committee sorted the multiplicity of demands thematically. A small drafting committee eventually used these materials to prepare the charter.

This document text was hurriedly prepared, primarily by Lionel “Rusty” Bernstein of the South African Congress of Democrats, with the ANC leadership seeing it only on the eve of the Congress of the People. Around 3,000 delegates assembled at the [two-day congress](#), approving each clause in the charter with a show of hands. The charter was adopted before the apartheid police halted the proceedings.

The Freedom Charter campaign and document have been the subject of [wide-ranging, ongoing theoretical and political debate](#). This has touched on organisational and ideological foundations, interpretive differences on content, as well as the degree to which the public demands are reflected in the final drafting process.

It led to fierce debates between [“Africanists” \(African nationalists\)](#) in the ANC Youth League and “Charterists”. The former rejected the ANC’s non-racialism and the Freedom Charter, with its assertion that

“ [South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.](#) ”

This precipitated the breakaway that culminated in formation of the [Pan Africanist Congress](#), led by [Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe](#).

The Freedom Charter, nonetheless, remained a programmatic vision for the ANC for more than 30 years, and continues to have a broad influence on the policies of government, such as those aimed at [addressing past injustices](#) and [promoting equity](#).

Abiding relevance

The Freedom Charter process was an imperfect but impressive attempt at capturing the will of the people and articulating an alternative vision to apartheid South Africa. The approach, scale and reach of the undertaking during exceptionally fraught times has relevance to contemporary debates about liberal democracy, public opinion and public policy.

From a democratic theory perspective, the Freedom Charter process has abiding relevance. It showcases the importance of ascertaining the pressing needs of citizens, as well as holding the elected to account in responding to the priorities inherent in this [“public agenda”](#).

It was ahead of its time: not just from a human rights perspective, but also in capturing the concerns and hopes of the public, and using this to inspire and mobilise for progressive change.

As the late anti-apartheid activist Denis Goldberg said in [Freedom Fighter and Humanist](#):

“ *The Freedom Charter was drawn up after about 10,000 meetings with the people of South Africa. It is special because it was not drawn up by a small group of visionaries seeking to impose their ideals. It is an authentic reflection of the views of the mass of the people who wrote down and submitted their wishes for the future of their country...* ”

The process of preparing the charter resonates well with the unprecedented times South Africans find themselves in. The Covid-19 pandemic will worsen poverty, unemployment, inequality and indebtedness in the country. Now, more than ever, an urgent need exists for robust public engagement and debate around a vision and social compact that will shape the post-Covid society in South Africa.

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