

**PADDY KEARNEY:**  
**CELEBRATING SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVIST**

Thank you for this honour and privilege of delivering the fourth Paddy Kearney lecture.

I had the privilege of knowing Paddy, and working with him, for some forty years. Like all of you, I remember him as a person of humility, quiet fortitude, immense resolve, and creativity in the midst of oppression and racial discrimination.

These were years during which activists rebuilt democratic, mass-based organization; and the names of Archbishop Hurley, Reverend Xundu, Rev Reuben Phillips were synonymous with moral and spiritual courage and solidarity with the struggles of workers, communities, youth, women, and democrats from all walks of life.

It was also a time of building institutions like the Diakonia Council of Churches, nascent trade union formations, women's organisations like NOW (Natal Organisation of Women), community-based organisations in Lamontville, Merebank, Phoenix, Hambanathi, KwaNdungizi: and Newlands East. It was a time during which the growth of a new political consciousness based on the values of black consciousness, non-racialism, non-sexism, religious fraternity, and human rights. All of these formed within the embrace of the Freedom Charter.

Above all, the activism across all the different terrains was based on a deep seated, non-negotiable, and vehement opposition to apartheid, to Bantustans, to the Tricameral Parliament and an equally resilient belief in, and determination to, create a democratic SA without any vestige of the apartheid era.

It is within this milieu that my generation of activists first met Paddy Kearny and Archbishop Hurley - and the Diakonia fraternity.

Paddy's humble, quiet yet steely demeanor was reinforced by a remarkable social and institutional entrepreneurship. He was able to find or create the bridge between his own spirituality and the political and social context and dynamics of different periods – as each period and sector presented its own idiosyncratic challenges and needs.

Paddy was indeed in Robert Bolt's words "a man for all seasons"!

Many are the lessons that the work and life Paddy Kearney has to offer to us all - the younger generation in particular.

**DECODING TODAY'S COMPLEX WORLD**

Achieving the goal of a democratic, just, and fair world has become much more challenging for progressive activists and organisations. Pandemics, climate change,

war, geopolitical tensions, the contest for economic and technological hegemony have wreaked havoc on societies, in particular the billions of working class and poor across both the developed and developing world.

These factors have exacerbated inequality, poverty, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and the worst of inhumane conduct. Add to this the dilution of democratic values, the undermining of democratic institutions, a vile populism that evokes the worst human behaviour, and the role of fake news and digital media – and the toxicity of the situation worsens.

Equally, rampant greed, elite capture of politics and uncontrolled avarice and extraction of rent tears apart the current capitalist model and its sustainability.

As John Kenneth Galbraith said, “this yet again, a time of ‘private wealth and public misery’”.

It is in times like these that there must be, on the one hand, an ability to decode and grasp the new dynamics at play, and , at the same time a set of core values and principles to guide us – both in theory and action.

### **ANCHORS OF PROGRESSIVE, CARING DEMOCRATS**

The new dynamics both across the world and in South Africa must increase our resolve to sustain, and put into action, our progressive values:

- Build inclusive democratic institutions,
- Social justice – must be at the center of progressive values,
- Hold public representatives and public servants accountable,
- Enhance social cohesion and a common nationhood,
- Strive for economic justice and a fair sharing of wealth and resources and decent jobs,
- Extend the social safety net
- Combat corruption, rent seeking, cronyism
- Fight racism, sectarianism, tribalism, misogyny
- Do not compromise on non-racialism and non-sexism

The path to these goals will be unpredictable, rough, and highly contested. But the vision that drives us must not be diluted, whatever the resistance from vested interests of all sorts.

## **NEW CONTEXT, NEEDS A NEW PARADIGM**

There are also a new set of imperatives which we need to interpret with an appropriate set of tools which will help to develop a new paradigm for the achievement social justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This new paradigm must respond to, among others,

- A different capitalism, which eliminates massive inequality, marginalization and exclusion both within a society and across the world;
- A fair globalization – and new global trade rules
- A just climate transition
- A society-wide climate action plan
- A profound and fundamental change in the economy – less exploitative
- A program to combat reactionary populism and fake news
- From economic extraction for the few to investment for the many
- Reinforce the role of women in society and economy
- Preparing the youth for a new world.

A crucial part of a progressive project, is the recognition, as Minouche Shafik puts it, “the social contract has failed” – that is – “the partnership between individuals, businesses, civil society and the state to contribute to a system in which there are collective benefits.”

Among those collective benefits as Amartya Sen sees it, is that the social contract should aim not just to meet people’s need but to improve the capabilities of every citizen to achieve the kind of life they value.

Shafik, goes further to indicate that “the rise of populism, the backlash against globalization and technology, the economic aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008 and the Coronavirus pandemic, the culture wars around race and women’s role in society and the youth protests about climate change – are bellwethers that a new social contract is needed”

## **A Man of CONSCIENCE**

“In matters of conscience, the loyal subject is more bounden of his conscience than to any other thing” - Thomas More.

In a world that is driven by great acquisition and economic extraction; in a world/country in which corruption is rife – often at the expense of the poor and unemployed.

The challenge: can a value driven conscience be stronger than the power of greed and corruption?

## **AN ACTIVIST FOR ALL SEASONS**

“Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in humble and loving spirit. The transformed non – conformist, moreover, never uses the passive sort of patience as an exercise to do nothing” - Martin Luther King.

Paddy’s democratic activism transitioned through so many different periods of our history. The repressive climate of the 70s and late 80s, the mass struggles and open campaigns of the late 70s/early 80s, the transition to democracy of the early 90s, and past two decades of consolidating democracy and combatting and capture of the state and entrenching corruption.

His unique ability to combine this spiritual transformation and beliefs with a remarkable activism and “non-conformism” enabled him to embrace inter- faith, non-racial, inclusivity.

The challenge: in a context where social and political mobilisation sinks to new/ worrying levels of narrowness and chauvinism - how do democrats keep the liberating flames of social cohesion, social justice, and temperance alive? Paddy would expect that no injustice should go unchallenged.

Perhaps we need to seek inspiration from Chief Albert Luthuli:

“What the future has in store for me I do not know. It might be ridicule, imprisonment, a concentration camp, flogging, banishment and even death. I only pray to the Almighty to strengthen my resolve so that none of these grim possibilities may deter me from striving, for the sake of the good name of our beloved country ... to make it a true democracy and a true union in form and spirit of all the communities in the land.

My only painful concern at times is for the welfare of my family but I try even in this regard, in a spirit of trust and surrender to God’s will as I see it to say: ‘God will provide.’

It is inevitable that in working for freedom some individuals and some families have to take the lead and suffer: The road to freedom is via the cross”

## **FAITH, HOPE, RESILIENCE AND ACTION:**

Whilst challenges seem foreboding, Paddy's life and work were driven by a deep faith in his spirituality, his refusal to lose hope and a formidable, yet quiet, resilience in action.

## ALBERT NOLAN

### Strengthened in One's Choice by Solidarity with Others in Struggle

Albert Nolan addresses the question of how one might draw strength in carrying out one's commitment. He associates the notion of 'liberation struggle' with the ideas of hope of a solution. He notes the importance of singing and dancing, and remarks that they are also a celebration of solidarity or unity in struggle:

The struggle rescues people from alienation, isolation and individualism. It restores ubuntu (humanness) and the experience of being a living member of a living body. Hence the slogan 'an injury to one is an injury to all'

Let us continue to be inspired by the power of a clear vision of a better South Africa and world, a resilient conscience that guides us in moments of doubt, and an uncompromising belief in justice for all.

Like Paddy, we will know that our individual lives will traverse/wade through endless waves of struggle but not in vain. New milestones will be achieved. There will also be setbacks – such is the nature of history.

But our progressive values, our conscience, and our resolve to constantly improve the world around us; will help us to deal with new contingences and realities, as we continue our march to a just, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist south Africa, "which belongs to all who live in it, white and black."

Paddy's message to progressive democrats and indeed all South Africans will surely be:

- Mobilize more and more people into democratic activism
- Constantly deepen the awareness of democratic values, among all communities
- Build social cohesion, religious unity in diversity
- Build institutions and organisations of civil society
- Engage in action and mobilise for action in support of just causes.

**In a speech at the 44th Congress of the ANC in 1955, he exhorts the members to be willing to serve and sacrifice:**

“But for all this we cannot claim to have prosecuted our campaigns with any semblance of military efficiency and technique. We cannot say that the Africans are accepting fast enough the gospel of service and sacrifice for the general and large good without expecting personal and at that immediate reward. They have not accepted fully the basic truth enshrined in the saying no cross, no crown”

Ultimately, we are all subject to what Gandhi says: “

“Non-violence is not a garment to be put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being.”

**GANDHI: “JUDGE ME BY MY ACTIONS”**