Introduction and salutations

The Mbeki Family; Director-General, Department of Culture and Sport; the Chairperson of the Robben Island Museum (RIM) Council, the RIM Council, RIM CEO, Executive and Management; Chief Heritage Officer; Thabo Mbeki Foundation; Tutu & Leah Foundation; Nelson Mandela Foundation and Sisulu Foundation; Ahmed Kathrada Foundation; ex political prisoners and exiled comrades; Mr Goldberg; Mr Diba; RIM business guests and sponsors; Mauritius and Senegal delegations; other museum CEOs; representatives of universities; government officials; NGO’s and the MC – Mr Putco Mafani.

Lastly, and certainly not least, I must thank all of you ladies and gentlemen, comrades and compatriots, who are here present this evening. There could hardly be a lecture in memory of as esteemed a leader as Govan Mvuyelwa Mbeki without an audience and attendees who
join in the celebration of the one we remember, love, respect and fondly pay tribute to.

I owe my presence here to Mr Mava Dada, the CEO of RIM. Early this year he wrote to me saying the RIM embarks on annual memorial lectures to honour the fallen heroes of the political struggle against apartheid. The invitation continued to request that I deliver a memorial lecture in honour of Govan Mbeki. I was privileged to be asked and it is indeed an honour to do so.

It is appropriate to recall that I have been asked before to memorialise several heroes of our long glorious struggle; not once, not twice but many times. In a sense I have become the praise singer of our departed leaders worthy of our memory and love. Most of these lectures are published and hopefully available to the young activist of our land.

It was my privilege to deliver the Fourth Bram Fischer memorial lecture hosted by the LRC, in Johannesburg. On another occasion, I wrote a tribute to our departed Chief Justice, Ismail Mahomed, and much later I wrote a memorial tribute to Chief Justice Chaskalson, and later to Chief Justice Pius Langa. I read the third Ruth First memorial lecture at Wits University. At their AGM, the National Association of Democratic Lawyers
(NADEL) invited me to pay tribute to Cde Abdullah Omar who was our Minister of Justice. In Kimberley, as guest of the Black Lawyers Association (BLA), I was privileged to deliver the Mangaliso Sobukwe first memorial lecture and was again honoured to praise Mangaliso Sobukwe at Unisa and at Wits when their respective main administrative buildings were renamed after him. At the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University I had occasion to deliver the first Griffiths and Victoria Mxenge memorial lecture. Three years ago I called to memory Jafta Kgalabí Masemola and last year I read a tribute to Godfrey Mokgomana Pitje. Last year I read the Nelson Mandela memorial lecture at the request of the UN in Geneva and at the beginning of this year I was honoured to deliver another lecture on Madiba at the request of the Supreme Court of Canada.

I therefore thank the Mbeki Family and the RIM for this privilege.

Every nation or people from time to time, produce from amongst their very own a truly courageous, selfless and visionary patriot who would stand tall and apart from the rest. As she or he passes on, the rest would know that it was a life well lived and it was a life worth remembering. We want to remember great lives in order to learn how to live our own lives. We call to memory the visionary and selfless amongst us in order to gird our loins for the difficult task of creating a better life for all. We extract out of their brave deeds, those abiding and ever fresh values of how best to
accomplish present day challenges. Of course, we also remember the departed greats in order to do no more than thank them for the awe-inspiring scarifies they have made in order to make our own lives better.

In many senses, it is meet and proper, if not somewhat belated that I join those who display public reverence to one of the greatest sons of this continent who we may forget only at our peril. But who is Govan Archibald Mvuyelwa Mbeki, fondly known as “Oom Gov”?

*The life and times*

Oom Gov was a quintessential intellectual activist skilled in writing, teaching, journalism, politics and history. He was born on 8 July 1910; only weeks after South Africa became a Union, in the Nqamakwe district of the Transkei to the amaZizi clan. His father, Skelewu Mbeki, was a chief and his mother, Johanna Mabula, the daughter of a Methodist preacher.

The importance of education and a keen interest for imparting knowledge ran like a golden thread in everything Govan Mbeki pursued, which may have been cultivated by the high premium placed on education and literacy in his childhood home. He attended a Wesleyan primary school where all grades were taught simultaneously in a single church hall. Later,
in 1927, he attended secondary school as a boarder in Healdtown – the same school attended by Nelson Mandela, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, Phyllis Ntantala, Raymond Mhlaba and Seth Mokitimi.

Govan received the *Bhunga* scholarship from the Transkeian Territories General Council to study at the University of Fort Hare in 1931 where, Mbeki recalls, he was shaped profoundly – intellectually and politically. Mbeki and McLeod Mabude, were the first two students to major in political studies at the University. It was here where Govan was first introduced to the Communist Party of South Africa and joined the African National Congress in 1935. He also completed a College Diploma in Education. Academics and politics did not take up all his time at Fort Hare. While there, he played rugby, served on the Athletic Union, attended music evenings and learned ballroom dancing. The dancing would prove a helpful distraction later in life during his time in solitary confinement.

After graduating, in 1937, he started a teaching post at the Taylor Street Secondary School in Durban where he met fellow teacher and activist, Epainette Moerane, whom he married in 1940. Together they had four children – Linda, Thabo, Moeletsi and Jama.
During this time, Mbeki continued to develop as a significant commentator and thinker. He published his first book in 1939 titled *Transkei in the Making*, a commentary on the social and economic conditions of the Transkei. His journalism flourished, becoming a contributor and editor of *The Territorial Magazine*, later renamed *Inkundla ya Bantu* which some have described as “the only significant newspaper owned and run by Africans”¹ until its doors were shut in 1952. In the 1940s he was a contributing editor for *Inkululeko*, a paper edited by his friend E.T. Mofutsanyana, and a contributor and member of the editorial board for the Guardian.

Oom Gov’s writings covered several topics dealing with the Reserve’s economies, advocacy for trade union organisations, the potential of cooperative ventures amongst African people not unlike *iLima* and *stokvel* practices, and education. His comments on education were a staunch push back on Bantu Education, about which Verwoerd was later to say: “In educating the African care is being taken that he is given only such education as will fit him for a position which is forever subservient.”²

Comrade Govan had remarkable stamina for work and accomplishment. He went on to complete a degree in Economics from the University of South Africa in 1941, believing that “the fundamental problem of the African people is economic.”

One Moeletsi Mbeki, repeats this pebble of wisdom just about every day when he opens his mouth thoughtfully.

By 1940, his work as a political organiser in the Transkei had resulted in two dismissals from teaching posts. His work as an organiser mirrored his writing as a journalist. During 1940, he focused on promoting cooperative credit societies. By 1941, he was elected Secretary of the Transkei African Voters’ Association (TAVA), a position which he held until 1948, which formed part of the broader Transkeian Organised Bodies (TOB) designed to mobilise residents and create localised and sustained political pressure against increased segregation laws.

Financial pressures meant that Govan Mbeki had to leave the Transkei in 1953 to take up a teaching post in Ladysmith and later in Port Elizabeth. The same year, he joined the new South African Communist Party (SACP)

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and continued educating locals in political awareness. His teaching days in a formal classroom abruptly stopped in 1955 when the apartheid government banned him from any teaching activities. He was approached by members of the Communist Party and offered a position to head the newspaper *New Age* (the paper which replaced the *Guardian* after it was banned in 1950) in Port Elizabeth. Besides his work at the *New Age*, Govan was actively involved in underground political awareness and education classes in the local townships. This work included producing leaflets for distribution across the townships. In the 1950s he also wrote for two leftist publications: *Fighting Talk*, a paper edited by Ruth First until it was banned in 1962, and *Liberation*.

In the preface to Mbeki’s book *The Peasants’ Revolt*, friend and fellow activist, Ruth First, gives us a glimpse of the process of one of the ANC’s most prolific thought leaders:

“Govan has a sharp mind, intolerant of the foolish and the faint-hearted. But in between the meetings, and the drafting of circulars and resolutions, the stern disciplinarian becomes the gentle and considerate friend.”

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Hilda Bernstein wrote:

“Govan by no means fits the classic image of a revolutionary . . . He is not an agitator but someone who quietly – there is no better way of putting it – manages to convince his opponent by argument. If you met him somewhere during a meeting of a congress, he always gave the impression that he was very timid, but in fact he has immense political passions and a will of iron.”

Shortly after the Sharpeville massacre and the subsequent state of emergency, Govan Mbeki was arrested and detained for five months in North End Prison, also known as Rooi Hel. This marked his first time in prolonged imprisonment. The banning of the ANC and other liberation organisations was instrumental in the decision to take up arms. Govan Mbeki was “one of the most important advocates of waging an armed struggle” and a founding member of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the military wing of the ANC. The first explosion by MK in December 1961 led to Mbeki’s arrest in 1962 under the Explosives’ Act, together with Jock Strachan and Joseph Jack. Govan spent five months in prison, three of

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which were in solitary confinement, but was later discharged as one of the two witnesses due to testify against him could no longer be tracked down and the other changed his story. Despite these periods of imprisonment, Govan continued to write for the *New Age* until it was banned in 1962. He also continued to recruit members for MK and arranged for their training on foreign soil.

In September 1962, Mbeki left Port Elizabeth for Johannesburg, mandated by the ANC to train potential replacements for its National Executive Committee as house arrests, bans and exiles were depleting its capacity. Two months later he was served with an order of house arrest which sought to confine him to his house in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. He was forced underground, spending most of his time at Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, a secret hideout for ANC and Communist Party activists.

On 11 July 1963, 56 years ago almost to the day, the police raided Lilliesleaf. Govan Mbeki was arrested and charged with sabotage together with seven other activists. What followed was the infamous Rivonia Trial where, on 12 June 1964, Govan was sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. While Mbeki was serving his sentence, his book *The Peasants’ Revolt* was published in 1964, a piece described by him and Ruth First as a book on Bantustans.
Besides providing lectures to younger political prisoners through a political education programme on Robben Island, Utata Govan pursued personal intellectual growth by completing an Honours degree in Economics and three years of Business Economics from Unisa. In addition, he taught other inmates on a variety of formal subjects ranging from basic literacy to modules included at Bachelor’s level.

Mbeki’s astute knowledge of the ANC’s history and policies was remarkable and incisive. I can’t conclude without recalling that seminal moment in the Rivonia Trial and his keen eye for detail. The legend goes that when Madiba showed him and other fellow Rivonia trialists his address to the court before sentence Oom Gov said, “Madiba we need not unduly invite this judge to hang us.” He took the pen and changed Madiba’s words “I have fought white domination and fought black domination. It is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.” The legend goes that on that Gov added “if needs be”. It must be said that a few other people have claimed they inserted the words “if needs be”.

He was released on 5 November 1987 after serving 23 years and four months on Robben Island. During the early 1990s, Mbeki turned his energy back to writing. He published a Xhosa language manual for ANC
political study groups. In May 1992, Mbeki published *The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa: A Short History* and by 1996 he had published a study, together with five post-graduate students from Fort Hare, on the liberation movement from the time of the Lilliesleaf raid in 1963 to 1993, titled *Sunset at Midday*.

In 1994, he was appointed Deputy President of the Senate. He retired from politics in 1999. Simply put, Utata Govan served one term and not up to 5 terms as many of us do or try to do.

In 2001, at the age of 91, he passed on in Port Elizabeth. I, together with many of our country and abroad, was privileged to travel to Port Elizabeth to his funeral.

*Some reflections on Govan Mbeki’s life and times:*

Revolution is a process and not an event. A process may take as long as a few generations. By revolution I simply mean the fundamental change of the power relations in a society from oppression and inequality to freedom and inclusivity; from economic marginalisation to social inclusion; from an unjust society to a just order.
The start of democracy was the start of a new struggle. The start of democracy and our incumbency as a democracy and government was the continuation of the struggle. It is a new phase of us now being in government. The values and ethical platform of the revolution should remain in substance in place. The most important ideal was to construct a state that will be an instrument for achieving the most pressing needs of our people. We had remained focussed on the targets of our revolution.

To do this we had to retain our ideological soundness but adapt it to the new role of running a government. All his life Oom Gov studied the character of our oppression and the transformation we needed. As early as in the 1930s and 1940s he worked without stopping to understand the agrarian oppression and economic character of apartheid and colonialism as the source of inequality. He understood the centrality of worker and people power if not abused but directed to genuine transformation. He was grounded by ideology.

I want to suggest that that ideological discipline and knowledge is gone. The hard work and perseverance and patience of the struggle have given way to instant gratification. I hear not a concerted analysis on the balance of forces. I hear not debates on how best to dismantle the social structure of apartheid and colonialism.
Notions of contribution towards the public good have evaporated. I am afraid that our leaders and young activists have stopped pursuing ideological understanding of our struggle. Our leaders have stopped or downgraded the debate on how to achieve society that promises inclusive prosperity and a better life for all. I no longer hear the vision of our glorious struggle. What I hear are power battles and no ideological contestation. I hear factionalism that is inspired not by ideological differences but by exclusive control of state institutions and its resources. The fight often is about an uncontested opportunity to accumulate wealth and often from the fiscus.

We desperately need a competent state that will minister to the urgent needs of the people. That we cannot do when those who take for themselves are many and never held to account. We should hope for a value system where the bad amongst us are shamed and kept away from the assets of the people. We cannot induct a culture of hard work, honest living and job creation when the dominant ethic is that there are shortcuts.

The state must provide poor and marginalised people the basic necessities of life. This is a simple task we are duty bound to accomplish. Housing, health and education and protection from crime are not luxuries.
Much has been done but even much more has to happen to unburden our people.

We need a competent state to do many urgent and valuable things. We need to protect institutions of democracy because we need them sorely. We need the full and effective apparatus of the state, including SOEs, to take us to the democratic ideal and inclusive prosperity.

We need a competent state to work to narrow and ultimately destroy inequality. We need a competent state to engineer substantial growth in favour of the economy and its people. We need our children to find a meaningful stake in the economy as creators of wealth and employment. No external force will do that for us.

We need a competent state to hold private power to account and act honourably within the laws of our country. But now the state cannot do so fully as all fingers are pointing in its directions.

Oom Gov would expect us to find a solution to the historic land hunger. We must reach land justice with all the legitimate tools at our disposal. Urban and peri-urban land hunger is deeply unacceptable in a country
where the state can access land almost instantly to restore a place of dignity for most urban dwellers.

Cde Govan would expect us by now to produce the bulk of our food, to make our own clothes and shoes, to produce our utensils to build our own houses and all that we need in our homes, to collect and bank our money ourselves and invest it the way we see fit to grow the economy; to look after what we already have with honesty and care and wisdom.

We need criminal accountability. We need to prosecute crime both petty and big. The poor people are the immediate and biggest victims of crime. We also need to prosecute the big people who take big money from the private sector and public sector. Again the victims are the poor.

As a parting short let me say: true leaders give but never take from the people. Those who take from their followers can never, ever be true leaders.

We now have a space for renewal and maybe the final chance for rebirth. We must re-infuse the amazing values of our veteran and wise and giving, and servant leader Govan Mvuyelwa Archibald Mbeki.

Thank you for listening.
God Bless and good night.

Dikgang Moseneke

9 July 2019