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Red Alert

Johnson's track-record as a futurologist is pretty dismal – Response to RW Johnson's 'The coming showdown'.

By Cde Jeremy Cronin

RW Johnson has penned yet another RWJ classic. You can almost hear the drum-roll, the roaring MGM lion as his title appears: 'The coming showdown. Part One' (Politicsweb, 19 May 2020). Johnson loves these breathless introductions. His 2016 book was titled 'How long will South Africa survive? The looming crisis'. This time we are pitched into a Western movie shoot-out. 'We are all strolling slowly', he writes, 'towards the gunfight at OK Corral which will settle it all.'

Johnson's track-record as a futurologist is pretty dismal. Back in the 1980s in an earlier edition of 'How long will South Africa survive?', he concluded that if the apartheid regime mobilised sufficient repression, it could rule South Africa well into the 21st century.

So what are Johnson's current predictions? South Africa is about to be hit by a debt tsunami and an inevitable IMF 'bail-out'. A structural adjustment garrotting of our country awaits, Johnson writes with approval and much evident glee. This looming IMF 'bailout', we are told, is an 'existential issue' for the ANC. But 'for the SACP and COSATU it is probably a survival issue.' The Alliance is about to be buried up on Boot Hill.

On the one hand, in the style of apartheid-era police ministers, having, as always, greatly exaggerated the influence of the SACP ('The SACP has for decades now provided the ANC with its agenda'), he is now, again as always, also predicting the Party's imminent irrelevance.

Johnson has been doing this since at least the 1980s.

Is there any point in responding once again? Possibly not. But there are, arguably, two areas that might usefully be unpacked – Johnson's revisionist narrative of the past 30 years, and the service he does in revealing the real motives behind his, and many others', active urging that South Africa take out a low interest COVID-19 related IMF loan.

For Johnson the post-1990 world into which a democratic South Africa was about to arrive was a 'closed international political community' ruled by naked market competition. The only hope for so-called emerging economies like South Africa was (and is) in his view to enter into

a race to the bottom to attract private investment in a competition with all of the others. In this bleak world view, we need to strut our stuff on the global pavement with the lowest possible wages, with the least corporate taxation, with the most liberalised financial markets, with the absolute minimum of regulation (including, presumably, environmental regulation), and by slashing the public sector work-force (including, one assumes, all of the health-workers and what's left of municipal sanitation workers that we are now suddenly realising in the midst of the pandemic are so essential).

The ANC-led government from 1994 onwards, Johnson writes, failed to appreciate any of this. In fact, although coming at it from a very different angle, the SACP has long argued that there was considerable naiveté in some leading ANC circles in the 1990s about the realities of the global situation in the midst of a then (but now faded) triumphal, 'end of history' neo-liberalism. All of the sentimental talk about a rainbow nation and the transformation of Nelson Mandela (formerly described by Thatcher as a terrorist) into a celebrated icon encouraged many local illusions. Leading figures in the ANC expected the imminent rolling out of Marshall aid to our supposedly 'unique' democracy. Africa was said to be on the threshold of a renaissance, with Thabo Mbeki the shuttle diplomat between our continent and the West.

Johnson has a very different reading of all of this. He claims: 'South Africa under the ANC thumbed its nose at the West, despite the fact that its major trading partners and investors came from there.' Really? Let's remember the first big lurch towards state capture – the crippling multi-billion rand arms deal concluded in 1999. Who were the big players in this sordid and hugely wasteful affair? Apart from the corrupt, the venal, or the naïve local political players, they were, amongst others, a French-German consortium for submarines, a British-Swedish consortium for fighter jets, and an Italian helicopter manufacturer. It was all funded at extortionate rates by major Western banks – Barclays Bank of England for the BAE Hawk and the BAE/SAAB fighter jets; Commerzbank of Germany for the purchase of four frigates and three submarines; Société Générale in France for the Thomson CSF combat suites for the German frigates; and Mediocredito Centrale in Italy which backed the purchase of 30 Augusta helicopters. This was not exactly neglect of 'Western trading partners', and, notwithstanding more recent Russian nuclear suitors and palm-greasing Chinese rail companies, the Western trading partners have not exactly been dumped. Think of the Spanish Vossloh engineering company responsible for palming off locomotives with a cool R620-million price-tag to PRASA. They were locomotives that had been intended for another country and that were too high for our own rail system.

I am not suggesting that every South African engagement with Western trading partners is equally fraudulent and ruinous, but I am asserting that Johnson's claim that the ANC government snubbed its Western trading partners for China, Russia, and, more improbably, Iran, Cuba and Venezuela is simply laughable. Entirely just political solidarity with Cuba, condemnation of the US's regime change agenda in Venezuela and its sanctions against Iran are one thing, the hard realities of global trade are another.

There is much more awry in Johnston's narrative of the past two South African decades. From 1994, he tells us, the 'ANC accepted the economy as it was: nothing was nationalised and all the major players in the economy remained as they were.' Johnston then immediately contradicts this statement by complaining about excessive ANC interference exerted on all

the 'major players'. But this claim is wrong for entirely other reasons. All the major players in the economy did not remain as they were. Part of the implicit elite economic pact that shadowed the more open democratic constitutional settlement involved the sweeping liberalisation of the financial markets which was at the heart of the 1996 GEAR package.

All the major corporates that had been bottled up in South Africa and forced into multi-sectoral conglomerates as a consequence of economic and financial sanctions grabbed the opportunity in a massive flurry of capital flight out of the country. Some of it was now legal, much of it illicit. Dual listings, tax havens, transfer pricing and the headlong financialisation of what had once been mining and manufacturing giants all contributed to this massive loss of investible South African wealth. According to the most comprehensive study of this, capital flight as a percentage of GDP rose from an average of 5.4% per year between 1980 and 1993, to 9,2% between 1994 and 2000, and averaged 12% between 2001 and 2007, 'finally peaking at a staggering 20% in 2007.' (Sam Ashman, Ben Fine and Susan Newton, 'Amnesty International? The nature, scale and impact of capital flight from South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Vol. 37, No. 1, March 2011). This was the true post-apartheid dividend the authors wryly remark.

Johnston may well be right that 'the Zuptas were responsible for massive capital flight', but their endeavours were amateurish in comparison to what was accomplished by the Old Mutuals, Anglo Americans, SASOLs and the like.

BEE policies are another major gripe that Johnston has: 'Companies...were forced to give away large proportions of their equity in order to bring in BEE partners'. The SACP has been a consistent critic of the significant diversion of potentially investible surplus into highly indebted (these were not give-aways) BEE shareholdings. Writing in 2010 Jenny Cargill estimated that at least R500 billion had been 'invested' in allocating shareholding to black groups. By her reckoning this compared to the less than R150 billion invested in housing and land reform at the time (*Trick or Treat. Rethinking Black Economic Empowerment*, 2010).

But who initiated this process? Was it the ANC government? In fact, it was the very hard-done-by corporations with whom Johnston empathises. In the early 1990s, years before the 1994 democratic transition and many more years before BEE charters, some of the major corporations in South Africa were courting politically-connected black South Africans with directorships, shares, senior internships, and finishing school stints at Goldman Sachs. This was clearly an attempt to reconstruct the ANC and to open doors to what would soon be 'the new political reality'. These enticements proved attractive to some (perhaps many) within the emerging elite. Much of the subsequent turmoil and corruption-driven factionalism within the ANC can be traced back to these early beginnings when being an ANC official, or carrying a business card that implicitly said 'No experience, no capital, but has the ear of this Minister X, DG Y, or premier so-and-so', suddenly brought financial reward.

But to get back to the heart of Johnston's article – the SACP and the IMF. Johnston tells us that South Africa's salvation lies in prostrating itself before a full-blown IMF structural adjustment programme. Either that or just 'keep printing more money to pay for everything' and risk 'a Zimbabwe-style outcome of capital flight and hyperinflation.' Johnson's historical amnesia includes forgetting that in the second half of the 1990s it was Zimbabwe that was being praised by our local economic mainstream media for its embrace of an IMF structural

adjustment programme (SAP). South Africa was advised to emulate Zimbabwe's example. It was this ruthless SAP that crippled Zimbabwe's productive economy and which led directly to the populist land grabs in the early 2000s, which in turn further crippled what was left of the country's formerly productive (if dreadfully, racially skewed) commercial agriculture. Zimbabwe's hyper-inflation was not directly the product of printing too much money, but rather a massive supply-side collapse, causing retail hoarding and spiralling prices for a diminishing supply of scarce commodities.

It is just such a supply-side collapse on a global scale, and not 'emerging' economy public debt, including South Africa's, that is now deeply pre-occupying many key international institutions, including the IMF. Which is why the IMF and World Bank have developed low interest COVID-19 related loan facilities. It is why the IMF leadership and Europe and African states favoured an expanded issuing of Special Drawing Rights – the IMF's synthetic currency which is not a loan but a claim recognised by all IMF members (including of course South Africa) on each others' holdings of reserve currencies. It was a call blocked by the US. In mid-April the IMF also announced a debt standstill for 76 of the world's poorest countries. In short, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic the IMF is considerably to the left of RW Johnston.

None of this is about charity, but (and on this Johnston is right) the globalised capitalist economy is deeply inter-locked with value chains spanning the hemispheres. Productive collapses in far-away geographies can impact negatively and rapidly on the advanced economies which are themselves taking massive strain.

What, then, is the SACP's position on the IMF which Johnston contrives to so misunderstand? First, there is history. The IMF and its fellow Bretton Woods multilateral institution, the World Bank, were key instruments in spurring a post-World War 2 capitalist recovery in war-torn Western Europe and Japan under the broad hegemony of the US. This was partly in response to the emergence of a new, rival super-power the Soviet Union, and partly a lesson learnt from the aftermath of World War 1 when defeated powers like Germany were forced into penury and national humiliation with the harsh imposition of reparations. This, in turn, was the seed-bed for the emergence of fascism and the inevitable plunge into an even more ruinous world war.

By the late 1960s, with their capitalist First World mission largely accomplished, these Bretton Woods institutions receded into the background. Then in 1973 the OPEC cartel imposed a huge hike in oil prices. A glut of petrodollars flowed particularly into private European banks from Middle East oil producers. The private banks, awash with cash, lent lavishly and unwisely to much of Latin America, Asia and Africa. By the late 1970s this Third World debt had become unpayable. This was the cue for the repurposing of the IMF and World Bank. They were dusted off and wheeled out to rescue private European banks. Structural adjustment programmes became the means for extracting debt repayments from an already impoverished Third World, in fact, they were what helped to perpetuate their very Third World-ness.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic none of this history should be forgotten. Nor is it past history. The current IMF-imposed gutting of Ecuador's public health funding (to mention just one example) is having a devastating impact in that country. But, Johnston will rightly object,

the IMF's low-interest COVID-19 loan instruments are not entwined with a full-blown structural adjustment programme. Nonetheless, all that is still subject to IMF macro-economic framework review. IMF's Article IV statements already indicate their conditionality for accessing its low interest finance. In our case, the latest IMF Article IV statement (January 2020) includes cutting the public wage bill, and other austerity measures. The SACP has urged caution.

One of South Africa's relative strengths is that our public debt is overwhelmingly rand-denominated. The proposed IMF low-interest loan is dollar denominated. In coming years the rand-dollar exchange rate may significantly deteriorate making a seemingly low-interest repayment now much stiffer later. Failure to meet repayment could then trigger the full blitzkrieg of IMF structural adjustment requirements.

And this is exactly what Johnston wants. For him, his passionate advocacy of a low-interest IMF loan is not about finding resources to manage the immediate crisis of a global pandemic. It's the baited hook with which he hopes to reel us in.

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Let's speak freedom in memory of the man who wrote that clarion call into the *Freedom Charter* – Rusty Bernstein

By the South African Communist Party

Let us speak of freedom in memory of the man who wrote that call into the *Freedom Charter* in 1955 and who was born 100 years ago on 20 March 1920 in Durban. The SACP dips our banner in honour of this hero of our revolution, Cde Lionel 'Rusty' Bernstein.

Lionel Bernstein's parents, middle class immigrant Jews from Europe, died when he was 12, and as the youngest of 4 children he was brought up by relatives in Johannesburg. Born with red hair, he was quickly and indelibly nicknamed Rusty. Cde Rusty's observations about his youth, having schooled at the all-white and elite Hilton College, then worked in an all-white architect's office in Johannesburg while studying part-time at Wits University, reflect the impact of racial segregation on South African consciousness at the time: *'I lived amongst whites in a wholly white suburb, and at weekends played hockey in an exclusively white team. Racial separateness was so ubiquitous, so deeply bound by both custom and law, that it never seemed in the least peculiar.'* After qualifying in 1936, he worked full-time as an architect from 1937 to 1941 and he later became partner in a well-established architectural firm.

Stirring and developing political consciousness

It was in the hallowed halls of his elite school, where he excelled academically but hated the way in which the school was run, and surrounded by the sons of white captains of industry, that his political consciousness was stirred and fed. He found himself involved in a debate on the future of civilisation, and through this and the influence of his teacher, his interest in history and politics was aroused.

He, like other intellectuals of that time, where mobilised by the campaign to support the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War against the fascist alliance of forces which raged from 1936 to 1939, and resulted in the nationalist and fascist victory with Spain being led by Gen Franco from then until his death in November 1975. The 7th Congress of the Communist International in 1935 endorsed Georgi Dimitrov's call for a broad united front against fascism and war and the CPSA acknowledged its own sectarian errors of the past and sought to ally itself with other anti-fascist and anti-racists groupings in South Africa. Rusty Bernstein read every book and paper he could find, became part of The Left Book Club, joined the Labour League of Youth (LLY) which is where he met Hilda Watts, participated in the anti-fascist league, and in 1938 became an active member of the Communist Party of South Africa, taking part in public meetings, in preparation and distribution of newspapers and pamphlets.

Cde Rusty described the Party as a non-racial enclave where there was a total black-white equality which could be found nowhere else in the South Africa of that time. In 1941 he, along with Hilda Watts, were elected onto the Johannesburg District Committee. Rusty and Hilda were married in 1941 embarking on a long lasting personal and political relationship until their deaths, in the course of which they had 4 children. For a year he interrupted his work as an architect to work as a full-time Party official and serve as Secretary of the Johannesburg District of the Communist Party.

Active duty for the revolutionary cause

In 1942 after the Soviet Union was attacked by the Germans in World War 2, along with many other South African Communists, amongst them Cde Joe Slovo, Brian Bunting and Jack Hodgson, Bernstein enrolled in the South African artillery as a gunner serving in North Africa and Italy with the Sixth South African Division. While he was in Italy, Hilda Bernstein had been elected to the Johannesburg City Council (by an all-white electorate) where she served for three years. When Cde Rusty returned home at the end of the war found an intensely divided society, one to be further polarised and subjected to a new fascism – apartheid.

Cde Rusty continued with his career as an architect, working in an architects' firm, where he designed South Africa's first drive-in cinema; but he his political consciousness informed his approach to architecture and he became disillusioned by ugly, new, all-white office-blocks, and more concerned about the wretched slums and shack towns growing up in the black townships.

The work that the Communists such as TW Thibedi, the first black member of the CPSA, Gaur Radebe, trade unionist and Communist, JB Marks and Edwin Mofutsanyane had started in 1941 with the decision to establish a trade union for black miners, led to a powerful all be it small African Mineworkers Union. The social and economic conditions of war time combined with the appalling conditions on the mines and both the Chamber of Mines and government's refusal to address the mine clerks' grievances sparked of a wave of minor unorganised strikes across mines. Government's response was to set up a Commission which took a year to consider the evidence, and then in late 1944, government decided that the recommendations of the Commission would not be implemented.

The 1944 African Mineworkers Union Congress, attended by 700 delegates, with 1 300 non-delegate miner observers, the President of the ANC, chiefs from various recruitment areas

deliberated on the challenges. The war of attrition between Chamber of Mines and government on the one side and mineworkers on the other continued through 1945, culminating in the drawing up of a list of demands by 2 000 members in a union general meeting in 1946 – again no response from the Chamber of Mines. Calls for strike action built up from May 1946 until on 4 August the date was set for the strike to begin on 12 August 1946.

The strike was characterised by militancy by the workers and violent response from the authorities, resulting in workers being forced back to work without winning their demands, the loss of life of 5 workers, and injuries to some 900 workers. By this time Cde Rusty's talent with words was obvious to all, and he was chosen to head the information publicity section of the party's Johannesburg office, from which he played an important role in the great miners' strike of 1946, producing its Strike Bulletin, which led to his arrest and conviction for sedition and aiding an illegal strike.

In 1986, the SACP published *A Distant Clap Of Thunder* on the 40th anniversary of the 1946 Mineworkers strike which details the events of the building of the union and the events of the strike. Cde Rusty was among those charged with sedition following the 1946 mineworkers strike. Rusty and Hilda Bernstein were ultimately convicted of aiding an illegal strike and received suspended sentences.

The power of information publicity and activism in the battle of ideas

During this post war period, Cde Rusty played a significant role in the ex-servicemen's organisation, the Springbok Legion, which almost from its inception was guided by the Party and became a major front organisation after the war. He served on its national Executive and was a key member of the editorial team of its journal, 'Fighting Talk.' The journal became independent in 1953, he remained its editor until 1955.

Rusty described himself as a better listener than talker, but his real strength lay in his ability to write powerfully and thoughtfully. His writings had considerable impact. He wrote extensively for a number of journals, including Liberation and the South African newspaper the Guardian, and all its successors. He describes how the demand for written material - for handbills, pamphlets, press releases, and policy statements from all radical organisations was insatiable. He was responsible for much of information dissemination by the liberation movement. He also wrote extensively for the African Communist, under the pen-name 'Toussaint'. Despite the harassment, he was to serve continuously on the board of the banned *African Communist* from 1959 to 1990.

Rusty played a major part on the committee organising the Congress of the People and he, along with others, was given the responsibility of drafting the Freedom Charter. This involved first collating and then capturing the essence of thousands of demands that had been collected during the meetings around the country. Cde Rusty acknowledged that the hardest part of this exercise was to prevent his own opinions from determining the final draft. His written words became a rallying call for those struggling for national liberation from that time on, and still inspire our revolution today: 'Let Us Speak of Freedom. South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.' Now in the period of covid19 is the time for us to lift up the Freedom Charter demands and policy positions as we re-shape our society and economy.

The whole of his career, spanning 60 years, was devoted to the Party; first as a paid official, and later as a senior member of the Central Committee. Cde Rusty took part with others in forming an underground Communist Party. He was also prominent in forming the Congress of Democrats, an organisation for whites that could co-operate with the African National Congress, which at that time was restricted to black membership only. This Congress Alliance drew in radical trade unions, and many other non-racial political organisations.

Detention, banning, trials, house arrest and exile

As with all leading Communists and freedom fighters, his life was peppered with repression. By 1953, both he and his wife Hilda were subjected to bans and restrictions that prohibited them from belonging to or taking part in the activities of numerous organisations including non-political bodies such as Parent Teacher Associations. They were prohibited from communicating with any other banned person - Rusty and his wife Hilda had to get a special judicial dispensation permitting them to communicate with each other!

Restricted by bans and harassment, in 1955 Rusty resigned from his lucrative architectural partnership. Cde Rusty was part of the 1956 Treason Trial until charges were dropped against him in 1958. In 1960 he and Hilda were both detained without charge for almost five months during the post-Sharpeville state of emergency, then banned and he was placed under house arrest from 18h30 at night to 06h30 the next morning, having to report to the police station daily.

During the day, however, Rusty was able to escape to the secret Party headquarters in Liliesleaf farm in Rivonia. In his 1999 autobiography *Memory Against Forgetting*, he revealed that he, Bram Fischer and Yusuf Cachalia all members of the CP Central Committee were initially opposed to the decision to launch an armed struggle concerned that there had been insufficient consultation. It was typical of his independent-minded honesty that he disagreed the most prominent of his colleagues, Joe Slovo, as well as Mandela. However, also typical of his discipline he remained part of the collective and faced the consequences with his comrades. When the police raided the farm, he was caught and charged along with the other Rivonia Trialists with planning revolution and sabotage.

Bernstein's description in his autobiography of his 90 days' detention, and of the solitary confinement as a form of torture is one of the most moving descriptions of the agonies of such imprisonment ever written. Possibly the most difficult time of Rusty and Hilda's lives was when Rusty was in detention after having been arrested at Rivonia. Resourceful as ever they found a means of communicating with each other through concealing messages in the seams of clothes that went in and out of the jail to be washed.

The experience of detention and solitary confinement was devastating. Sometime later he wrote of this experience: *'It is hell, not just the loneliness and solitude of tedium but the devilish neurotic fears, anxieties and tensions with only one's mind for company and nothing to move it to think except one's own troubles. You can't imagine what this does to you. You become not just the centre, but the whole of your universe, your own fate, your own future. Nothing you can do or say can possibly affect the life of anyone else, or so it seems. What little courage I have gradually erodes in loneliness with no one near to sustain me.'* Such has been

the experience of so many comrades in apartheid police stations and prisons, a past never to be repeated in South Africa.

Charged along with his comrades in the Rivonia Trial, Cde Bernstein was eventually acquitted in 1964 since there was no proof that he was involved in planning the armed struggle. Although found not guilty, he was rearrested as he left the dock and put back in prison, and then released on bail. Shortly after his release, the police came to arrest Hilda, but she managed to escape from their home and went into hiding. Cde Rusty and Hilda now decided they must finally leave, and, helped by loyal friends, they slipped out of their house at night and were driven over the Botswana border, eventually making their way, via Zambia where the British authorities declared them to be prohibited immigrants to Tanzania, and then to Britain. Their flight across the border and subsequent journey is described in Hilda's book *The World That Was Ours*.

In exile, the Bernstein's were joined by their family, while Rusty worked as an architect in London. After 17 years, he retired in the late 1970s, first to Herefordshire, and then to Kidlington, near Oxford, where he and Hilda lived in a small, modern house filled with African artefacts

For a time, Rusty conducted seminars in Moscow and taught briefly at the ANC college in Tanzania. In 1987 he lectured at the Lenin School in Moscow, on the history of South Africa's liberation struggles to the men and women of the Soweto generation, training to be guerrilla fighters. In 1988 to 1989 he and Hilda spent time at the Solomon Mahlangu College in Tanzania helping to establish a school of politics.

In 1994 he returned to South Africa to run the ANC's press office during the first democratic election - a time of high excitement and exhilaration. He attended the inauguration of Nelson Mandela President and stood with the other Rivonia veterans on the terrace of the Union Buildings, in Pretoria, to celebrate the democratic breakthrough. 'We are, perhaps, the luckiest generation on earth,' he wrote, 'for we have seen the peaceful triumph of the cause to which we have devoted our lives.' He then returned to Britain since he and Hilda did not want once again to be separated from their children

In 1995 he travelled to Italy to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of an area of Italy from the Nazi occupation and represented the South African regiment that fought there.

Thereafter he and Hilda returned to South Africa on a number of occasions, amongst them when he and Cde Hilda both received honorary doctorates from the University of Natal in 1998 for their role in helping to bring democracy to South Africa. The Bernstein's donated most of their books to the university's history department. In 1999, Cde Rusty's personal account of the unwritten history of South African politics between 1938 and 1964 was pushed under the title *Memories Against Forgetting*. They participated in the reunion of the Rivonia trialists in Johannesburg.

Back in England, Rusty continued to be respected for his integrity and sacrifice. Lionel 'Rusty' Bernstein, architect and freedom fighter, born in March 1920; died at the age of 82 at his home in Britain on 23 June 2002. His death was respected by the President of South Africa personally passing his condolences to Hilda Bernstein, by a minute of silence in both South

African houses of parliament, by three respected UK papers published large obituaries, by the First Lady of South Africa flying to London for the funeral and in the week following the funeral, Nelson Mandela and his wife paying a personal visit to Hilda Bernstein.

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