



Looking to the past to shape Parliament's future

Yunus Carrim says *hamba kahle*, after 30 years in the House

- By Moira Levy

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On the eve of his retirement after 30 years as a Member of Parliament, Yunus Carrim shares a timely reminder of South African democracy's "glorious" days. In an interview with MOIRA LEVY he reminisced about the 1994 Parliament, which he described as "an organic reflection of what this country is capable of".



A long-standing veteran of student, civic, community and political struggles since the '70s and in what became the Mass Democratic Movement of the '80s and early '90s, Yunus Carrim says the political culture of that time was carried over into the country's first democratic Parliament and made manifest in the ANC's legacy of peaceful negotiations.

He recalls a moment during his first term. Leaving his office at about 2am and finding that the exit gate to the parking area in the basement was closed, he had to detour past the Old Assembly chamber. As he got nearer to it, he could hear a murmur of voices and clinking of cups and cutlery.

"Outside the chamber, people were milling around the tables with urns, sandwiches and biscuits. I couldn't resist, I peeped into the chamber. Ramaphosa was in the chair. Obviously, someone had said something amusing because he was roaring with laughter and everybody else was laughing, including the old National Party government MPs. There was such an air of banter, maybe even camaraderie. I stood there for a minute or two, transfixed – and it struck me: 'my God, look at this! In the late '80s who would have thought this was possible?'"

This was early in 1995 when the Constitutional Assembly was busy drawing up the final Constitution.

Carrim also recalls looking down from the Public Gallery one day, after seating some guests who were visiting Parliament: "I was stunned at how multicultural it [the House] was. It was the first time I got a bird's-eye view of the House, which you can't get when you're sitting in it, and I realised how wonderful this Parliament is: Africans, Indians, 'coloureds' and whites. Traditional leaders and gender activists; capitalists and communists; non-racialists and ethno-nationalists; MPs in traditional attire and others in western dress; and more – artists, poets, religious leaders, atheists – a microcosm of South Africa – engaging in debate, not fighting, over class, race, gender and other issues. It was so lovely to see, the images there [reflected] the promise of that period and what the country is capable of being."

That is clearly what has inspired him to keep going for 30 years – even when the going got much tougher – and what still moves him today.

"We did wonderful things when we first came to Parliament. You didn't have to wear a tie. You could wear traditional outfits, dress how you wanted provided [it was] reasonable. It was exhilarating, remarkable. The first few years of that Parliament were actually glorious, a phenomenal experience for people of my '70s generation of activists who knew we'd see a non-racial democracy someday, but not necessarily in our lifetimes, and certainly not that we'd end up being its first MPs. Imagine what it felt like to the generations of activists who came before us – who endured so much and never gave up hope – who ended up in Parliament!

"The public was free to come to Parliament in any attire they wanted, within reasonable limits. And members were instructed to keep their office doors open at all times, which was symbolically important as it signalled that Parliament was open and accessible to the public. But then MPs found their possessions disappearing from their offices – handbags, items of clothing, computers and so on. So, MPs were given keys for our offices."



Carrim started out in struggle politics in 1971 when, as a high school student in Pietermaritzburg, now Msunduzi, he became chairperson of the Pietermaritzburg branch of National Youth Action. He continued being politically active at the University of Durban-Westville, was detained for five months for his role in the student protests in solidarity with the Soweto uprising, got a UN scholarship to study sociology in the UK, and from the early '80s played an active role in civic organisations. He became secretary of the Pietermaritzburg Combined Ratepayers' and Residents' Association and served in other community organisations that were part of the United Democratic Front (UDF). Through his interest in table tennis he became active in the South African Council on Sport (SACOS). In 1987 he was elected to the Natal Indian Congress executive and since 1990 served in the ANC District Executive Committee and several South African Communist Party (SACP) structures, including the SACP Central Committee and Politburo, editing its publications, "Umsebenzi" and "African Communist".

Carrim's 30 years in Parliament were mostly spent in the National Assembly where he chaired several portfolio committees and served as Deputy Minister of the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) (2009 to 2013) and Minister of Communications (2013 to May 2014). Most recently he was a member of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) where he chaired the NCOP Select Committee on Finance.

Carrim still talks the language of 'people's power'. "Our vision in the ANC was that Parliament is an organ of popular power, a tribune of the people, a People's Parliament." But then he qualifies this, saying "of course, that's in theory. In practice, sadly, we have increasingly fallen short of that."

While all three pillars of state – the Executive, the Judiciary and the Legislature – are important, in his view Parliament is ultimately the most important. "If Parliament doesn't work our democracy doesn't work. We need to make significant progress in being a much more effective Parliament if we are going to make this democracy work, now more than ever."

For this he looks to the Constitution and related legislation that still binds us to a narrative that was forged in struggle. "We have the most open, transparent, democratic Parliament imaginable. It's a tribute to the national democratic revolution that we waged. It is as close as you can get to our concept of a People's Parliament."

He recalls as a new MP being transported on a NDF [National Defence Force] helicopter to rural northern KwaZulu-Natal in 1995. That was at the time of the Constitutional Assembly. "We had to go to remote areas to report back on the [talks]. Those people were not interested in clause 79a or b of the Constitution. They wanted to talk about jobs and basic issues, like when would they get electricity and so on. The majority of people, it seems, also came to see the new government; it was an emotional/psychological thing for them.

"But they were given an explanation in isiZulu about the key features of the Constitution. Some academics estimated two and a half million people had been consulted by then about our country's Constitution. It was unprecedented."

One of the most remarkable features of the new Parliament, he says, “was the democratic way we did things, the give and take manner in which we did it.” This he firmly attributes to the culture of negotiations that underpinned the ANC at that time.

“The legacy of negotiations [emerged] when we started talking in the mid ‘80s [and through] the entire period from the late ‘80s. That was carried over into Codesa [Convention for a Democratic South Africa] and into the first ten years of our Parliament. It flowed mostly from the ANC and its leadership, and its ability to negotiate. You saw that reflected in the Parliament of the first five to ten years. We shared the chairing of committees and so on. It really was a government of national unity.”

Carrim likes to say, “that didn’t fall from the skies. It didn’t happen by accident.” He says it was the product of a unique national coherence that brought together Madiba and the National Party’s De Klerk, and eventually Prince Buthelezi and Constand Viljoen, the two outliers who had resisted negotiations. “We had the wisdom of people like Tambo, Madiba, even De Klerk. Ten days before the election, Buthelezi came in. [Then came] Viljoen, who had his base amongst the white right. That this country brought these four people together was unprecedented.

“Of course, there are people, mainly the youth, who feel our negotiated settlement – by not putting fundamental transformation of the economy and class and land issues high on the agenda – was a sell-out. Parts of their criticism are correct. But they also don’t recognise the precarious, unstable, conditions in the country at the time and the specific context. Also, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, retreat of western social democracies and the emergence of a unipolar world in which the West was dominant. The pressures of all of this and from our neighbouring countries and allies on the continent constrained what was possible, given the domestic and global circumstances.

“In any case, it was a vibrant, dynamic, effective Parliament. [It came] as close as you could get to what the ANC’s vision was of a National Democratic Parliament.”

Carrim refers to his existential state at the time. “I could have pinched myself. It was such an honour to be in the first National Assembly in a democracy. Little me, who would have thought?” Yet there was guilt too, he says. “There were so many others, including those killed [in the struggle era] ... so many others [who] did more than people like me, who deserved to be in Parliament.

“That was the first five years, maybe ten, but that tradition has faded fast. I think that it is sad where we’ve come to.”

Carrim has loved being in Parliament he says, although he adds maybe not so much nowadays. He does reminisce a lot about the early years of the democratic Parliament, but he is not simply dwelling on the past. He feels the new seventh Parliament could maybe do better.

He is outspoken about where he thinks the ANC has gone wrong, citing arrogance and complacency: “We continued to get a very high percentage of the votes at elections ... [We had] a misplaced notion that the masses will always be with us.” In this way Carrim reminds one of another MP of the first Parliament, Professor Ben Turok, the founder of the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) and its journal, *New Agenda*. They are among the few who have combined determined loyalty to the ruling party that was



their life-long political home with an ability to call it out for renegeing on its promises to the people by putting the needs of the party first.

"The reason Parliament has declined is because the ANC has declined as a whole. The one reinforces the other. You see increasing corruption, distance from the masses, the mismanagement of resources ... Parliament is the way it is because the ANC is the way it is ... You can't separate the decline of Parliament from the decline of the ANC. Yet each of these structures could help the other to grow stronger if they worked in particular ways."

He compares the quality of those early committee chairpersons with the current crop. "It's partly to do with the fact that those chairs had a struggle pedigree. Now, if you're in a chair, unless you're an NEC member, you don't carry the same political, social, cultural weight in the movement. Those chairs in the first five to eight years were quite strong mainly because of their histories."

The quality of MPs is also declining, he says, and suggests this may be because they "don't have deep roots [in the struggle] like the first lot of MPs and chairpersons [had]. What is puzzling is that when the first lot of ANC MPs came to Parliament they had no experience of governance, They were struggle activists. Yet they adapted very fast from struggle to government mode.

"What drove those first generation of MPs was a struggle ethos, a feeling that we must deliver. Also, maybe deep down, we felt we had to prove that people of colour could run a sophisticated, modern, highly advanced developing country. It was about showing that it can work, that it doesn't have to be sadly, like many of the countries on our continent, Asia and elsewhere in the developing world [that] went through colonialism and ended up, over time, not being able to govern effectively and becoming distant from the masses."

He adds another reason for what he describes as the "fading" of the democratic Parliament: "Some people are coming into Parliament for the wrong reasons. They see it as a personal career and are driven at times by material need or for power or the ability to offer patronage, or because they can increase their profiles."

The other problem Parliament faces, says Carrim, is the deep divisions that started emerging in the ruling party, especially since the 2007 Polokwane conference in which Thabo Mbeki was replaced as ANC president by Jacob Zuma. These divisions are often reflected within the ANC study groups in Parliament and affect the performance of committees. The majority decision reached in the parliamentary study groups is supposed to be binding on all ANC MPs in all subsequent committee and House deliberations,¹ but that is no longer always the case, Carrim asserts: "Especially in years

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of the ANC elective conferences, for example, the Zuma and Ramaphosa factions in the ANC made it hard to get consensus in some study groups and you couldn't always move swiftly in decision-making in the committee."

There is also the ongoing problem of lack of resources and the increasing disparity between the resources – in research and other technical support – available for the Executive and for Parliament.

"Take our Finance Committee. We had a good researcher and content advisor, but neither of them was a tax expert. How do you manage a finance portfolio without a tax expert?

"We've been raising this repeatedly – empower us with better technical skills. Obviously we can't match the battery of experts [the Executive] has on its side." He refers to the National Treasury as an example: "We cannot hire external experts from the universities, private sector and multilateral institutions as they do. We just don't have the means."

Referring to the way in which candidate lists are finalised he says, "once you've got those elected to the top of the list, then you say there are not enough women or youth or regional representation or the list is not non-racial enough, then you alter it accordingly." He would also like to see the introduction of a code of conduct for MPs like the one for municipal councillors. and believes the party list system must be "fundamentally altered".

"I think there's a need to review the electoral [system]. We've reached a stage now where we need to consider a combination of a ward and list system as we [have] in local government." His preference is for multi-member constituencies.

Carrim was allocated the Alfred Duma constituency in KZN. However, he doesn't live in the area and it's a three-hour drive, and more if he goes to the outlying areas, there and back from his Msunduzi home. Since the outbreak of Covid and the increase in his workload in Parliament and other political responsibilities, he has not been going to Alfred Duma municipality anywhere near as much as he used to. But he actively does constituency work, taking up issues by engaging with department officials through emails, phone calls and cell phone messages. But delivering to his constituents by using a cell phone or iPad or a computer without meeting them personally is "not right," he says. He has had to attend to many constituency issues from his home town and from different parts of the country and makes every effort to be accessible; he has kept the same cell phone number since 1995. He also thinks the allocation of resources to constituency offices must be considerably increased.

That said, it is the constituency work that he will miss most when he leaves Parliament. "If you take up an issue [in the constituency], even if it takes you five times longer than it used to, at some stage there's an outcome, mostly favourable, sometimes not. But you do see a tangible result. With legislation and political oversight, results take much longer."

And he plans to still take part in electioneering and other campaigning. "You enter into people's homes, you sit there, you may not, to your shame, speak isiZulu, somebody translates, if English won't work, but inside a home you get a much better sense of how



people live, how they see things, and you get a better feel for where the country is."

Carrim makes it very clear that "improving public participation is utterly crucial, indispensable, to make this democracy work. What is Parliament, after all, if not a representative organ of the people? It is utterly indispensable that we have more active and concerted public participation."

He says a People's Parliament and participatory democracy cannot be the responsibility of Parliament alone. Citizens must visit Parliament, sit through committee hearings, observe House proceedings from the public gallery. They do come, he says, but not as much as they used to. He struggles to explain why that is the case. There was more participation before Covid and the introduction of Zoom meetings since Covid and after the fire at Parliament, he says. Then there is the inevitable bureaucracy at the Visitors' Centre to gain entry to Parliament. .

"But I'm not convinced that the reason they're not coming is because of the bureaucratic process... People do come to Parliament, at least they did before Covid." So, what is different now? "People have lost interest," he concedes.

"In the early days civil society was based on grassroots organisation but those ordinary people who engaged Parliament at that time are no longer engaged. They're just trying to put bread on the table and [keep] their heads above water. And if they do engage, its through taking to the streets in anger."

Now it is mostly the "elites" who appear at public committee hearings, those who have "a vested interest" in making representations. "It's big stakeholders – big business, Cosatu and all the big unions. Where are ordinary people, the individuals coming to make presentations? Where are the smaller trade unions, the smaller and less-funded NGOs and community organisations?"

"Parliamentary funding for smaller organisations to take part in public hearings has faded ... We need to provide free access to data. We have to have multiple languages in committee meetings and translators. We need to advertise public hearings more in traditional local languages, especially on radio.

"We don't have anywhere near the resources that are required. Right now, the national fiscus is extremely strained and Parliament's budget has been reduced."

When civil society structures do make representations, he says, they focus on their specific, narrow interests. "We say to them, look how much more weight you will carry if you all march on Parliament. In a vibrant democracy, a democracy that claims to have a People's Parliament, you can't just come and make representations at a public hearing. You also have to mobilise, organise, take to the streets. You have to petition, you have to write to the papers, you have to engage in social media, put all sorts of pressure on us."

On the way ahead for Parliament Carrim says only, "we are opening up into a very new era". He was speaking before the 29 May election and was understandably cautious, saying only that we could expect the seventh Parliament to be "more splintered across the board" with coalitions.

But he was clear on the urgent need for more cooperation, and not only in Parliament. "Our aversion to the private sector needs to be reviewed, given the deep economic, financial and other crises we face. We urgently need economic growth and

jobs. We need private sector assistance for Transnet, for Eskom. The only issues are the terms on which the state engages them. Public private partnerships are an alternative to privatisation. The state must have majority control of water, electricity and other basic services, but the private sector can take part in a variety of forms of partnership without taking control of these services.”

His advice for the new Parliament is a repeat of a deeply felt political principle he has raised in public before: It’s a call for greater cooperation between political parties. “Now more than ever before, no matter how much we dislike each other, if we do not cooperate more in Parliament how are we going to get the cooperation of the private sector, trade unions, civil society, NGOs, CBOs, traditional leaders, religious leaders? We need that goodwill.”

The need to remove what he calls the unnecessary divisions in Parliament is clearly a theme close to his heart: “Whatever our ideological, policy and other differences, we need to work much more closely together to achieve developmental goals that we share in common that are in the interests of all the people but primarily the poor and disadvantaged.”²

He points to the dangers of mobilisation around a tribal base – “once you light that fuse you won’t be able to put it out easily” – and of the fractionalisation of the ANC, which he says is allowing for the emergence of “regional fiefdoms”. Drawing on his experience in the NCOP he calls for the expression of provincial and other interests below the level of national government and for strengthening the NCOP “to allow for the expression of diversity as part of our national unity”.

He was possibly addressing his own party when he expressed the need for “more give and take in Parliament” and less emphasis on the need to be a majority: “We can’t just do what we want. We need to be called to account.

“There is a new set of dynamics. We are not used to not being a party without a majority vote, and if that happens a new party culture has to emerge. But even if we are the majority, we have to respect Parliament more, take it more seriously. If you strengthen Parliament that can help to strengthen the ANC and vice versa.

“We are edging towards a tipping point – [but we are] not there yet. Yes, we, the ANC, are mainly responsible for the mess we’re in. But we’ve certainly done a lot over the 30 years overall and have shown we are capable of doing good work. The potential is certainly there. We need to harness it and work across all political parties – including the EFF – whatever our differences, and across the widest range of civil society [organisations].” **NA93**

ENDNOTES

- 1 An ANC parliamentary “study group,” which comprises ANC MPs who serve on a particular portfolio committee, allows each person to express their views, but when consensus is reached the majority decision is meant to be binding on all members in the committee.
- 2 See for example <https://www.pa.org.za/blog/yunus-ismail-carrim>