

BEING THE ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY, MR. BABATUNDE RAJI FASHOLA, SAN ON THE OCCASION OF THE 100TH POST HUMOUS BIRTHDAY ANNIVERSARY OF LATE CHIEF JEREMIAH OYENIYI OBAFEMI AWOLOWO HELD ON THURSDAY, JANUARY 29, 2009 AT THE MUSON CENTRE, ONIKAN LAGOS

PROTOCOLS

It is humbling and really momentous to be here today to celebrate the 100th post-humous birthday anniversary of a truly awesome human being. An African, whom God made a Nigerian by birth to show the way to a people he truly loves and has blessed more than any nation on earth.

It is humbling because the man in whose honour we are gathered has grown larger in death than when he was alive. The ideas he canvassed many decades ago, the problems he foretold when I was not born and the solutions he proffered at that time are still with us today. The problems still challenge us as indeed the solutions he proffered are relevant.

Whether some accept it or not, the fact is that Chief Obafemi Awolowo along with Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, the Owelle of Onitsha, were the true founding fathers of modern Nigeria and in my estimation rank in the same pantheon that leaders like Churchill was to England, Napoleon to France, Abraham Lincoln to the United States, Gandhi to India, Kwame Nkrumah to Ghana and Nelson Mandela to South Africa.

I do not at anytime discount the illustrious contributions of his contemporaries to his success but the fact that such great men who served with him recognised and accepted his leadership can only lend credence to his awesome abilities and his role as a first among equals.

His achievements in brick and mortar, such as the Liberty Stadium, Cocoa House, Premier Hotel, Ikeja GRA, Ikeja Industrial Estate, Shonibare Estate to mention but a few are reminders to all of us of how little we have failed to add to what he started.

His far sightedness and foundations for the future in his published works like the "Voice of Reason", "The Problems of Africa", "Path to Nigerian Freedom", "The Peoples' Republic", "My March Through Prison" and "The Travails of Democracy and the Rule of Law" are eloquent testimonies of how much time he devoted to prepare the future for a nation he loved so dearly and a people he served so selflessly.

I owe an unquantifiable debt of gratitude to these published works that bear testimony of the prodigious talent of a highly industrious public servant and unrepentant patriot, because they have served as useful road maps for me as I navigate the daily challenges of governance in Lagos State.

As we are faced with the impact of a global recession in 2009, and how to manage our recent oil boom and the role of Government as regards taxation,

budget implementation, Chief Jeremiah Oyeniyi Obafemi Awolowo had dealt with all of these issues over fifty years ago.

In his speech on the Appropriation Ordinance given in the House of Representatives, Lagos on 15th March, 1952 while discussing the budget he said:-

“On the revenue side, one outstanding feature of the Government Policy is reflected on that side of the Budget. The policy of the Government is totally dominated by extreme and unwarranted caution, conservatism and traditional street-beggar economy... A street-beggar sits alongside the road and waits for fortune to smile on him. He gets what he can from the passer-by, and thereafter he tries to adjust his expenditure to his uncertain sources of income.”

These words, uttered in 1952 are no less true today about how we have been reticent in managing vast oil resources for over 9 years, and we are now unsure of what will happen because they have dwindled.

In the same speech, he propounded the principle of “maximum social advantage” as what should guide the making and implementation of any budget.

The question to ask is whether our budgets have delivered maximum social advantage when our people have no access to qualitative education, healthcare, housing or power supply, especially when they are compared with other oil producing nations especially in the Middle East, or our brothers in Angola.

In the same speech on Electricity, he sounded a note of caution about the potential waste of the manner of investment which rings true today 57 years later as we grope for solution to our electricity problem; this is what he said:-

“Now these days we hear a good deal about Corporations – Nigeria Electricity Corporation, Production Development Boards, and so on and so forth. But I would like to sound a note of warning, and I do appeal to Honourable Members to study the functions of these Corporations and the composition of their Directors very very carefully”.

“Take Nigeria Electricity Corporation – that is the last I shall mention. I have been told by an expert and I am sure Honourable Members would like to discuss this matter further, that it is proposed to have a big power station in Enugu which should light all the towns and villages along the way from Enugu right down to Lagos. Experts have told us that in order to do this you require transformers in large numbers each of which must be of capacity of 50,000 kilowatts, and these experts told us that this is five times the capacity which is

required for lighting Lagos and the mainland. It therefore follows that if this wonderful scheme materialises they are going to have transformers at Ile-Ife, Ondo, Owo, the size of which would be five times the size of the power which is used for lighting Lagos. That would be a colossal waste. We are told that whatever may be strength of the transformer, the efficiency is only about ninety-nine percent, that is, each transformer of 50,000 kilowatts will be losing 500 kilowatts from time to time, which I understand is the size of the power station at Ibadan. In other words, each of these various transformers which are dotted along the route from Enugu to Lagos will be losing what is required to light Ibadan from day to day”

As if he was speaking today, in his speech delivered fifty-five years ago during the discussions of the Supplementary Appropriation Ordinance given in the House of Representatives in Lagos on 18th August, 1954, which he titled “FINANCIAL CROSSROADS”, which is where we are today, he suggested how to manage cocoa windfall in a way different from how we have managed oil windfall.

I again crave your indulgence to quote him:-

“Now, before I leave the question of reduction of export duty on cocoa I would like to say something about the windfall which has accrued to the Government on the export duty on cocoa. As a result of this exceptional buoyancy in the price of cocoa which prevailed about four or five months ago, the Government has benefited to the tune of about £6 million. This is a windfall which was never at any time expected by the Central Government. I understand that about £3 million of this windfall has already been committed for certain purposes but there is a balance of £3 million in the hands of the Central Government. It does not require a financial expert or economist to appreciate the fact that the Central Government under the circumstances is well off indeed. As a matter of fact, I think it can be said that they have more money than they can very well make use of. I am, therefore, strongly of the opinion, Mr. President, sir, that the Regional Governments also should benefit from this unexpected windfall, and I therefore advocate that the Central Government should be graciously disposed to allocate this £3 million to the Regional Government – not strictly on the basis of derivation but in ratio of 40:30:30., to the West, the East and the North”.

In essence, he was urging, as the States are now agitating in the Supreme Court, that the funds, unconstitutionally kept as Excess Crude Funds, should be distributed to the federating units for the purpose of achieving the maximum social benefits of budgets, for the benefit of the people.

As for the people who predicted gloomy times ahead for our Country, and the role of taxation, he made his views very clear that the problem did not lie with the resources of the country, but with the quality of leadership and the management policies they choose to pursue.

I cannot resist the temptation to quote him again, this is what he said:-

“Newspaper readers would have noticed that of late an economic prophet of gloom had emerged, warning people about the disastrous future that awaits this country. But I do not share the view of that prophet. It is well known that during the past ten years the revenue of this country has increased with little or no effort on the part of any Financial Secretary by about 400 percent. Of course, the expenditure has also increased correspondingly. And I suppose that some Hon. Members would have read in the press a statement of mine which was published on Saturday, the very day on which the Honourable the Financial Secretary delivered his Budget Speech. In that statement, I did make a point to note that there is no cause for alarm about the future of this country, that is, speaking economically and financially, and that the future will be what the leaders of this country choose to make it”.

On taxation and vote-catching tactics of politicians, he had this to say:

“I refer to the vote-catching technique of some politicians in this country whereby they scare people about anything that savours of taxation. Now allegations have been made against various politicians in this country that they have misled people into thinking or believing that they do not need to pay tax before they get all amenities they want...And so it goes to show the effects of irresponsibility of certain politicians in this country by creating scares about payment of tax. And I repeat that the future is going to be what we make it. ...We are on the threshold of this New Constitution, are on the cross-roads; there is that broad smooth road, with promises of no – taxation, and efforts to get money from other places, leading nowhere but to perdition, poverty, disease and economic enslavement; and there is the other road – people who go therein pay tax. They also have to apply self-help and self-sacrifice to get where they want. But this road, Mr. President, leads to success, to prosperity and to the exploitation of our natural resources by the people of this country”.

Ladies and gentlemen, I share the optimism of the Sage then as they are relevant today, that this country is too richly blessed in human and natural resources for us to fear the future.

What we must fear are ourselves. What we must do is to get back to the basics and listen to him as he talks to us even today, seemingly from the

grave, in the immortal words contained in his publications. They remain evergreen as useful roadmaps to solving the problems of Nigeria and even the world.

Even as we have named monuments and institutions after Chief Jeremiah Oyeniyi Obafemi Awolowo, I think that we have not honoured his memory and service enough. I think the greatest honour we can do him is to listen to his immortal words as he speaks to us in his written words to enthrone a government that is good, that cares and that serves the people for whom it exists.

That in my humble view would be the greatest honour we can do this great African patriot.

May God bless his gentle and kind soul.

Thank you.

Babatunde Fashola, SAN
Governor of Lagos State

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