

EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS ON LARGE DAMS (DURBAN, 1994)

President Nelson MANDELA (Head of State)

I have always considered dams and bridges the most graceful and impressive of civil engineering structures. They speak to the imagination. But then, I am a novice in construction, having spent time in the quarries of Robben Island. There I also had the opportunity to contemplate the magic of water, since I was entirely surrounded by it for rather longer than I might have wished.

I am very pleased that the International Commission on Large Dams has chosen South Africa for the venue of its eighteenth tri-annual Congress. It is not only an honour for our new democracy to receive so many experts from all over the world, but in my opinion it is also very appropriate.

I should therefore take this opportunity to welcome you all.

The modern economy of this country could not have grown to what it is today without its large dams. South Africa unfortunately lacks the substantial underground water resources that many of your own countries possess. We rely largely on surface water, requiring storage for river flow regulation. There are no major rivers with a steady, dependable flow. This situation requires the creation of large reservoirs to store water.

In many countries, there is sometimes strong opposition to the construction of large dams, generally on environmental and social grounds. I do recognise the validity of some of these arguments. But in South Africa we simply have no choice if we want to develop our industries and feed our people, give them work and clean drinking water. However, we shall see to it that environmental and social issues are treated with the respect they deserve. With the establishment of a democratic government there are even better conditions for implementing the policy of Integrated Environmental Management.

Returning to the issue of the use to which our stored water is put, there will be a decided change in emphasis. In the past, some of our dams were constructed virtually for the exclusive use of the privileged section of our population. Henceforth, the accent will shift to enhancing the standard of living specially the majority. Clean drinking water for each citizen within a reasonable distance from home will be our goal.

Water for expansion of irrigation is very limited, and most of the resources unlocked by the creation of new dams will be required for domestic and industrial use. However, whatever water does become available for irrigation use will also be applied to increase the productivity of land owned or occupied by the underprivileged.

In this process of reorientation, the needs of our major urban areas will not be forgotten. It will be necessary to continue the building of large imaginative inter-basin water transfer projects to keep the wheels of industry turning, so that the economy of this wonderful country can grow to its full potential, and so that our people may obtain jobs in a rapidly expanding modern sector of our economy.

We shall intensify discussion about joint projects with our neighbours especially to our north. They have abundant potential for major hydro-electric projects and fresh water sources which would benefit the region as a whole.

Whatever our future sources of water will be, the talent and imagination of our engineers and scientists will be of paramount importance. South African engineers have been in the forefront of a number of developments important to the art and science of dam engineering, and in other fields concerned with water resources. This includes the major inter-basin project currently under construction



T. P. C. van Robbroeck, Chairman, South African Committee and President Mandela arrives at the Opening Ceremony.

by Lesotho and South Africa jointly. Many of you will visit this project of global dimensions. The Katse Dam, the keystone of the scheme, will eventually be the highest dam in Africa.

I am proud of the active role South African engineers play in your organisation. I want to make use of this opportunity to congratulate our own Theo Van Robbroeck on the honor of having been chosen to serve as President of the august body for the three years following upon this Congress. I consider his election as a mark of the confidence your organization has in the competence of South African hydraulic engineers.

As Director-General, Mr. van Robbroeck is also responsible for the National Public Works Programme, under the direction of the Minister of Public Works, Mr. Jeff Radebe, who is also present here this morning.

I would also like to congratulate the South African National Committee on Large Dams, and the organising Committee, on the excellent arrangements that have made this Congress possible. I hope that the city of Durban and its people treat you well, and that you will spend an enjoyable time here in the Province of Kwa Zulu-Natal.

I understand that many of you will stay after the Congress and take part in a number of study tours to our dams and to our other attractions. I invite you to make use of that opportunity to look around you and observe the many problems we have to contend with. Although you will see modern infrastructure, as good as any in your countries, you will also see grossly underdeveloped rural areas and large urban settlements with barely any infrastructure. It is my earnest intention and that of my Government to bring about changes. We want to improve the lot of the poorest of our people. Next time, when you again have a Congress or Executive Meeting in this country, you will be able to see these changes with your own eyes. That I promise.

In this endeavour, we need the co-operation of the international community. Not handouts, but sound investment in our economic future, and technical co-operation.

President Pircher, I wish you and your organization all the best in the future, and may your deliberations here in Durban contribute to the well-being of humanity.

I now declare this Eighteenth Congress of the International Commission on Large Dams open.



Head of State President Mandela and ICOLD President Pircher.



President Mandela arrives at the Opening Ceremony.