

Mandela worries both friend and foe

Oliver Tambo, leader of the African National Congress, dropped in on Canada this week. Assorted politicians from Brian Mulroney to Ed Broadbent fawned over him with a fervor that was as phony as it was cloying.

Forgotten were the ANC's car bombs, burning victims or disturbingly close links to the South African communist party. Our politicians, like gnats at a watering hole, put up their quivering little noses and caught the rich scent of left-wing votes and media attention on the warm night air.

No mention either that the ANC speaks for only a minority of black South Africans. Nor of when Mangosuthu Buthelezi, elected head of South Africa's largest black community and one of Africa's outstanding leaders, came to town. He was snubbed by the establishment. Why? Because Buthelezi urges moderation, democracy and free enterprise.

Such concepts are unsuited to black Africa, hold our politicians and leftist media. What they seem to want is the thrill of Marxism and massacre.

What would the elder leader of the ANC say about all of this? Nelson Mandela, now 69, has been serving a life sentence since 1964 when he was convicted of terrorist acts. Since then, Mandela has been a beacon for black nationalism and is probably the only man who might stand a chance of uniting South Africa's feuding black groups. Many claim to speak for Mandela, including his doted-on-by-the media wife, Winnie, who likes to urge a fiery death for ANC opponents.

But Mandela remains silent: A powerful, remote and mysterious symbol, like the sleeping kings of African legend who will wake and save their peoples.

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This may soon change. For some time, the government has been casting about for a way of releasing Mandela. He has been offered his freedom in exchange for a pledge to renounce violence. Mandela has refused. No matter what we think of his politics, such tenacity commands our respect.

Mandela's continued detention is badly hurting South Africa's image. More important, Pretoria realizes it will have to eventually deal with the ANC. I suspect it would rather talk to a Mandela than to the present Soviet-backed Tambo group.

Releasing him, however, will not be easy. Right-wing Afrikaners will bitterly oppose freeing a man they consider a terrorist and communist. Doing so might also give the wrong message that Pretoria is bowing in fear to the ANC.

It now seems that Pretoria may avoid having to make such a difficult political decision. A judicial tribunal may shortly order Mandela, Walter Sisulu and five other senior ANC leaders freed. If so, South Africa will be at once plunged into a fascinating and dangerous period.

First, Pretoria's security forces will have to ride out the explosive demonstrations by blacks that will ensue. Next, where will Mandela go? If he stays in South

Africa, Mandela will become a magnet for unrest — unless, of course, he adopts a moderate program for political change and allies himself to Buthelezi's Inkatha movement. But if Mandela openly advocates violence, he may again face arrest — something Pretoria clearly wants to avoid.

Many South African whites would prefer to see Mandela go to exile in Zambia or Tanzania. This brings up the intriguing question of who would then run the ANC. A Mandela in prison is a useful saint; a Mandela returning to take over the reins of the ANC is another matter.

Would the ANC's current bosses quietly make way for Mandela and his men? Look for precedent at one of the founders of the Algerian revolution, Ahmed Ben Bella, who was long jailed by the French. When finally released, he returned to take over power. Algeria's leaders, who had loudly voiced loyalty to a jailed Ben Bella, quickly looked him up.

There is also the danger, which deeply worries South African security officials, that a freed Mandela might be poisoned by ANC rivals. His death would be blamed on the whites, so making Mandela a splendid martyr. It would also assure Tambo and his cohorts their continued leadership. Which, now that some form of genuine black power for South Africa is clearly inevitable, makes the current ANC leaders all the more unlikely to make way for Mandela and his old guard.

Small wonder that Pretoria frets so much about releasing the Mandela genie from his bottle. Doing so could split the ANC, or provoke civil war, spark a vast black rising or even help bring peace to South Africa. But don't expect our politicians to grasp all of this. They just want their photo taken with Tambo.