A mple tribute has already been paid to the late Dr Bliss (see De Rebus, September 1984: Bench and Bar edited by P M Bekker). Maurice (or Mosie as he was better known by his colleagues) practised at the Pretoria Bar from 1934 until his death on 14 June 1984 while sitting as an assessor in a criminal trial in the Supreme Court, Pretoria. During his extraordinarily long and distinguished career at the Bar, he was an acting judge on several occasions but was never permanently elevated to the Bench. He graduated from the University of Pretoria and went on to obtain a LLD degree from Leiden University. His thesis was entitled “Belediging in die Suid-Afrikaanse reg”. It was remarkable in that it was one of the earliest legal theses in Afrikaans and also in that Afrikaans was not his mother tongue.

However his pioneering intellect was not confined to legal endeavours. His purity of thought and clarity of vision ventured into the political realm too. It is not unusual for lawyers to be attracted to politics and on the contrary their contribution to public life is enormous. While at the Bar, however, many counsel deem it prudent to keep their political beliefs private.

Dr Bliss dabbled in politics in the more cloistered forum of the Pretoria Parliamentary Debating Society. It appears from a letter written to him on 28 November 1966 by the Society which was then in the first year of its existence, that he was invited to act as President of the Society for 1967 and to open the first meeting that year by delivering the “Speech from the Throne”. (The letter is reproduced on these pages. - Editor)

Reproduced below is the text of a speech written by Dr Bliss, and according to witnesses present, actually delivered on 7 February 1967 in a room at the Pretoria City Hall:

PRETORIA PARLIAMENTARY DEBATING SOCIETY
PRESIDENT’S ADDRESS 1967

MR SPEAKER AND MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE:

I am glad to welcome you to this the second session of the PRETORIA PARLIAMENTARY DEBATING SOCIETY.

During the recess, a general election resulted in a Progressive Party majority in the House, and I have accordingly called upon the leader of that party to form a Government, which he has done.

The reality of one racially integrated South Africa has been accepted by the electorate, and the interdependence of the racial groups has been recognised, particularly in the economic sphere. My Ministers have been given a mandate to shape their policy and actions in accordance with the multi-racial character of South Africa.

You will be asked to approve the Government’s policy of abolishing restrictions and combating discrimination based on race, colour, creed or sex, from every sphere of activity.

In the field of international relations, my ministers will take all reasonable steps to normalise relations with moderate countries in Africa. Every effort will also be directed towards gaining South Africa’s rightful place in the comity of nations.

Bills to increase the material prosperity of all inhabitants of this country will be laid before you, inter alia to abolish all measures which retard the expansion of the economy, more particularly the industrial colour bar, restrictions on the mobility of labour and collective bargaining. Crash programmes of training will be introduced, particularly in the industrial field, to enable all citizens to participate in the development of their country to the full extent of their capabilities. A system of minimum wages applicable to all workers, with due regard to regional differences in the cost of living will instituted.

A bill will be introduced to guarantee individual liberty as understood in Western Democratic countries. All enactments under which citizens can be deprived of their liberty without recourse to the Courts of Law, will be repealed.

The current inflationary tendencies in the economy and the rising cost in all sectors will be combated by the appropriate measures, both fiscal and in respect of the shortage of skilled manpower.

The necessary steps towards summoning a National Convention comprising all the major racial communities of South Africa, will be taken. The main function of this National Convention will be to consider proposals for constitutional reform and to make recommendations to Parliament, for enactment by it, of a reformed constitution for South Africa.

You will be asked to approve the Government’s education policy, aimed at...
decentralisation and the utilisation of our human resources to the greatest advantage to the country as a whole. The necessary administrative arrangements for effective organisation, including changes in the names and functions of certain Government departments will be made.

Measures will be introduced to alleviate the effects of the recent drought, and to guard against similar water shortages in future.

Mr Speaker and Members of the House:
Additional estimates of expenditure for the current financial year and estimates of expenditure for the ensuing financial year will be laid before you.

Mr Speaker and Members of the House:
I declare the Session to be duly opened.

Such sentiments must indeed have been unpopular, possibly even regarded as seditious in some circles during 1967. Yet today this speech, astonishingly accurate in principle, seems harmless, even trite. One even finds a hint of the RDP foreshadowed in the economic reforms proposed! Having witnessed the peaceful transition to democracy in South Africa, we forget how impossible this once seemed in the hopeless days of Apartheid. It is the courage and honesty of a single man who flouted the conventional wisdom of his day to declare his vision of a just society which sets him apart. Happily he has been truly vindicated.

L Nowosenet,
Johannesburg Bar

Nigerian Judges sue the Press

In a remarkable development, nine judges of Nigeria's Supreme Court are suing a newspaper for libel over claims that they had compromised their position by accepting "bribes" of Mercedes cars from the former government of Ibrahim Babangida. The newspaper claimed that the alleged gift of cars was an attempt by Babangida to influence the judges in the aftermath of the annulment of the 12 June 1993 election. The judges reject the allegations, saying that the cars are registered in the name of the Supreme Court as official government vehicles. The involvement of the judges poses problems for the judicial system. "The question every Nigerian is asking is who will try the case? Surely the judges will not try their own case when US$30 million (R108,9 million) is involved?"

The Commonwealth Lawyer, November 1994