

Playing with fire: assessing John L. Dube's presidency of the South African Native National Congress, 1912-1917

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The African National Congress of South Africa (formerly the SANNC) will be celebrating its centenary in 2012, a moment that many already recognise will be one for both celebration and reflection. This paper offers an appraisal of the contribution that the inaugural president, John Langalibalele Dube, made not only to the organisation but also to the intellectual life of his era. It is well known that he had founded the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* and a path-breaking educational establishment, Ohlange, in the preceding decade. His distinctive contribution to both these ventures will be assessed. While the inauguration of the SANNC was a symbolically important point of departure in the history of popular politics in twentieth-century South Africa, John Dube's presidency represented another kind of symbolism: the culmination of a tense struggle to articulate a clear political voice. This paper therefore explores the relationship between his various public roles and the possible reasons for his choice as first president – a matter which throws much light on his relationship with contemporary African intellectuals. The paper goes on to examine not only his particular contribution to the SANNC through its first five years - which witnessed a concerted campaign against the 1913 Land Act, the constraints of operating in war-time conditions, and the growing radicalisation of workers across the country as they too struggled to find a distinctive voice – but also to intellectual life in the first two decades of the century. Ideas concerning the meaning of 'the nation', the nature of progress, land questions and citizenship were hotly debated; Dube's particular stance on such critical political issues of the day will be highlighted. Finally, the paper attempts to unpick the rather controversial ending to his SANNC leadership in 1917, which brings in another dimension to intellectual endeavour: the role of the 'personal' in relation to the 'public' and 'political'