

Does South Africa really belong to all who live in it?

When I came to political senses as a teenager on the Cape Flats, wallowing in anger, this was the one clause in the Freedom Charter that upset me: "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white." They (whites) came from elsewhere; they caused all our problems; they took the land and exterminated the indigenous people like the San; they uprooted, disenfranchised, tortured and killed black people at will. How on earth could the Congress Alliance even think of such a concession?

In the course of time, and as one became aware of the broad front of resistance and solidarity across the colour bar, this clause for me became the single most admired assertion in the Charter. When I learnt of John Harris's execution (a story, by the way, told very movingly in David Beresford's recent book, *Truth is a Strange Fruit*), of Beyers Naude's sacrifice, of Ruth First's martyrdom, anger gave way to admiration. That memorable photograph of those four women of different shades walking confidently up the steps of the Union Building in 1956 to protest the deviance of apartheid, remains in my judgment the most moving image of non-racial solidarity this country has ever produced.

But something has gone wrong, especially since 1999. And depending on where you spend your time working and living, you may be more or less conscious of the racial fault-lines opening-up across the land. I spent much of my time in rural and agricultural South Africa during the past year, far away from the cosmopolitanism of Johannesburg or Durban (let me leave out Cape Town for now, for it might be a racial order 'of a special type'). I spend time in former white universities where students often come from rural South Africa, where racial divisions between white and black are still more deeply ingrained than in other parts. I listen carefully to the voices of white and black parents, students and communities up and down South Africa, and I am troubled. Events such as Reitz or Ventersdorp or Waterkloof or Skierlik are NOT examples of spontaneous combustion. They represent underlying lava-currents of racial discontent (simply dismissing these horrific events as 'racism' does not advance understanding, let alone solutions) that constantly threaten our young democracy, and which will from time to time burst through the social surface like an erupting volcano with huge damage to our quest for a non-racial society.

Why is this happening? I believe we lost ground with the project of nation-building in the post-Mandela period. Our language started to change, our sense of others started to shift. Angry and undisciplined voices emerged all over the land, and the politics of accusation and insult replaced earlier efforts at dialogue and embrace.

We adopted angry public positions that conveyed to especially young white South Africans a sense of our anger; in the name of equity and redistribution, we send messages throughout society which are interpreted as a politics of exclusion rather than one of common purpose in rebuilding our shattered past. The fact that we achieved little of either—equity or

redistribution—is a separate (though critically important) matter for purposes of this discussion. What we have failed to do, in other words, is build a strong and sustainable sense across the nation (we did this briefly with the World Cup) that “together” means black and white, all of us, in developing this economy, this democracy and this society.

Of course we have a Constitution that guarantees certain rights and policies that, on paper, do not discriminate. But here we need to be very careful: we must distinguish *official directives* (the formal claims of a policy) from *emotional meaning* (the felt-meaning of a policy) among ordinary citizens. Few people have major gripes with our national policies or laws; in fact, you might have noticed that the people who most often cite the Constitution in their claims are those on the right of the political spectrum.

What divides the land are not our policies, but the secondary messages we send somewhere between the formulation of official policies or the conduct of press briefings.

What do I mean by this tricky term “secondary messages”? I mean the subtle and sometimes not-too-subtle cues, suggestions, actions and symbols communicated not through official statements but through dispersed segments of society which often speak for, or at the very least are not repudiated by, the powerful.

Messages such as ‘the struggle was/is about black people in general and Africans in particular.’ Messages like ‘only blacks need apply.’ Messages like ‘despite your academic results, we reserve places for medical school on a sliding scale from White to Indian to Coloured to African.’ Messages like ‘only an African can become President of the country.’ Messages like ‘it is a matter of time before your farms will be taken from you and given to the dispossessed.’ Messages like ‘we will punish you if you do not get your employment equity commitments right as soon as possible.’ These secondary messages are often much more powerful than primary or official messages that emanate from the political centre of the country.

I could go on with many other examples.

Here is the good news. South Africans are emotional people, an insight recognized by Nelson Mandela and also by President Jacob Zuma. Strong leaders who lead in the aftermath of the world’s longest surviving racial order, know we do not have to make a choice between equity and equality, or between redistribution and reconciliation. We can and must do both. We must recapture that sense of grace and generosity not in our policies but in our practice. This is not an easy or popular way to go for grace, reminds a friend, is always scandalous, and generosity risks rejection. But this is what bold and courageous leadership is about; we can afford nothing less.

In doing so, our leaders must be careful not to think that by attending to the extremes of society—like the whites of Orania or Mr de Kock in Pretoria Central—we can build respect,

tolerance and *samewerking* in middle South Africa, those ordinary citizens where the quest for hope and healing still remain, and where the desire to make a difference can still be harnessed by government and civil society.

But our starting point should be different. Perhaps the primary message should be that the struggle for development is about South Africans in general, and human beings in particular.