



RHODES UNIVERSITY
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PO Box 94 Grahamstown 6140 South Africa
Tel: (046) 603 8148 Fax: (046) 622 4444 e-mail: vc@ru.ac.za

Citizenship

As is the tradition, I wish on this occasion to share some thoughts with our graduates as they leave us or proceed to higher degrees at Rhodes.

One of the books of the outstanding African and Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani is titled *Citizen and Subject*.¹ Developments since 1994 and events in recent months move me to reflect on this theme and to share some thoughts on this important matter.

My question is: in the context of the past and current fissures of our society, what progress have we made in South Africa since 1994 in terms of forging an inclusive citizenship?

1994 without doubt was, politically, a revolutionary breakthrough.

Centuries of racial oligarchy and brutal repression of black subjects demands for citizenship rights finally gave way in 1994 to a democracy in which, for the first time, all South Africans became citizens and were accorded full citizenship rights.

Critical to this development was the imagination, creativity and courage that we displayed as a people to rid ourselves of tyranny and to fashion our new democracy. We also forged a fabulous Constitution and Bill of Rights which held out the great promise of far-reaching political, economic and social rights that did not exist for all, or *at all*, prior to 1994.

Having been 'subjects,' millions of us made the significant transition and advance to becoming 'citizens'. We looked forward to the promise of the progressive realization of hard-won citizenship rights so that we could live productive, rich, rewarding and secure lives.

A number of realities, however, seriously compromise, or have the danger to compromise, our constitutional ideal of full citizenship rights for all. Indeed, while formal political rights remain intact, they substantively condemn us or could condemn us and large numbers of our people to conditions that are more akin to being subjects.

In his new book, *South Africa Pushed to the Limit*, the insightful Hein Marais rightly warns of the danger of the 'recourse to rousing affirmations of identity and entitlement' and to populist discourses of 'authenticity' – 'who is a *real* South African, who is a *real* African, who is *black*, what is a *man*, what is the role of *women*.' These utterances are accompanied by ever more 'narrow and exacting' interpretations of culture and tradition.²

Marais' comments help to put into perspective a number of recent events. One is the crass utterances of chief government communicator Jimmy Manyi on 'race'. Another is the repugnant tabloid chatter of Kuli Roberts on so-called Coloureds. A third is Minister Trevor Manuel's amazing outburst that Manyi has 'the same mind that operated under apartheid', and does not appreciate that his 'utterances are both unconstitutional and morally reprehensible.'³

Given the apartheid legacy, there can be no quarrel with redress and social equity for economically and socially disadvantaged poor, black and women South Africans. In this regard, Judge Albie Sachs rightly notes that pervasive inequities 'cannot be wished away by invoking constitutional idealism.'⁴

Still, we find ourselves in the grip of a *profound paradox*: the use of 'race' to promote redress and to advance social equity. In the words of Judge Sachs, we are making 'conscious use of racial distinctions in order to create a non-racial society.'⁵

Such an approach has many dangers. For one, employing solely 'race' for redress purposes could benefit only or primarily the black political and economic elites, and so simply reproduce the severe class inequalities that we already have.

The conspicuous consumption of our off-the-body sushi-loving elites and the rapid ascendancy of politically-connected elites into billionaire and millionaire businesspersons make no difference to eliminating the massive inequalities in our society.

For another, using 'race' to advance redress and social equity could ossify racial categorisations and ensure that we continue to construct identities primarily along the lines of 'race'⁶

Surely our goal as well as our strategies must be to *erode* and *dissolve* racial categorisations and ensure that our identities are instead rich, multiple, fluid and dynamic rather than frozen along 'race' lines.

We must, of course, 'never lose sight of the fact that the goal is to establish a non-racial society in which social and cultural diversity is celebrated and seen as a source of vitality, and in which race as such ultimately has no political or economic significance.'⁷

In the fabulous and inspiring track called 'Say Africa', Vusi Mahlasela croons:

I may be walking in the streets of London...or Amsterdam...or New York
But the dust on my boots and the rhythm of my feet and my heart say Africa, say
Africa

I walk the streets of London, Amsterdam, New York and other cities annually to popularise Rhodes, meet alumni and donors and raise funds for Rhodes. But, indeed, 'the dust on *my* boots and the rhythm of *my* feet and *my* heart say Africa.' I know this is the case for many, nay, *most* of you.

We must confront the misguided and the charlatans and chauvinists among us who stridently seek to give ever more 'narrow and exacting' answers to the questions of 'who is a *real* South African, who is a *real* African, who is *black*, what is a *man*, (and) what is the role of women.'

These self-serving answers could reduce millions of us to subjects and lay the basis for the kinds of chauvinist thinking and actions that lead to the killing fields of My Lai, Sabra and Shatila, Srebrenica, Darfur and Rwanda, and fertilise our own disgraceful manifestations of xenophobia.

We must loudly proclaim, as does our Constitution, that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.' We must insist, for all the reasons that were given at the 'I am an African' speech at the launch of our Constitution, that we are all Africans.

At the same time, we have to also jettison glib formulations like 'forget the past and embrace the future,' and also not confuse aspiration with realities, as in simplistic assertions that we are the 'rainbow nation.'

We have a long road still to travel before racism and sexism, prejudice and intolerance are defeated, and unacceptable and alienating institutional cultures are transformed.

As Njabulo Ndebele notes, 'the fact that racism may still exist in the actions of young students ...suggests that racism continues to be fed by institutions such as families, schools and churches' and we need to give attention to how 'we bring up our children.'⁸

Issues of race, culture, identity, language and many kinds of hurt remain to be confronted. We will only become truly free and equals when we begin to tackle the issue of 'difference' with sensitivity, honesty and courage, and begin to respect and embrace diversity in all its rich and myriad forms. We shy away from open and honest engagement with these difficult, complex and emotive issues at our own peril.

There is another issue that also needs comment: the growing tendency to seek to silence critics of government and the state by questioning their credentials and especially asking about their 'struggle' credentials.

The view that as we citizens we must satisfy certain conditions before we can express our views, or that we can only critique if we participated in the anti-apartheid struggle, is wrong and dangerous.

It effectively turns millions of citizens, including all those born after 1994, into subjects and makes a mockery of our Constitution.

It is our constitutional *right* as citizens to freely express our views and to critique. Indeed, it is our *obligation* to 'speak truth to power.'

Finally, having failed, yet again, to win the cricket world cup we have nonetheless triumphed in the dubious honour of now being the most unequal society on earth.

Already a perversely unequal society in 1994, during the past seventeen years income inequality has increased in general and within so-called 'racial' groups.

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994. Conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994.

The poorest 20% earn 1.7% of income; the richest 20% take home 72.5%. 43% of our fellow citizens eke out an existence on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year – that is R8.22 a day.

If it were not for state social grants, death through hunger and starvation would join HIV-AIDS as a leading cause of mortality in South Africa.

The old divides of 'race', class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Impunity and morbid ills such as rape and abuse of children destroy innumerable lives and wreak havoc in our country.

Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, crass materialism, corruption, tenderpreneurship, and unbridled accumulation, often of the most primitive kinds, run rampant.

It makes one recall the lines of the great German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht who in 'Parade of the Old New' writes:

I stood on a hill and I saw the Old approaching
but it came as the New.
It hobbled up on new crutches which no one had ever seen before
and stank of new smells of decay which no one had ever smelt before.

What does citizenship mean for those who are poor, unemployed, struggle to survive or live in fear of rape, other violence and crime; what does it mean when 'the Old' approaches as 'the New', when there are 'new smells of decay'?

Without doubt, South Africa is an infinitely better place than it was before 1994. There have been many social gains and many positive developments since 1994. Our institutions of democracy and justice and our media remain robust and vibrant. There continue to be strong voices defending and promoting constitutional values and ideals and a just and humane society.

On the final page of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Tatamkulu Nelson Mandela writes:

The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed
For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others
The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

He adds: 'I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended'.

'The truth is that' in 2011

- We may be citizens, but our citizenship remains to be fully developed. We are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others'
- 'Our devotion to freedom' of all from want and to a life of dignity remains to be seen, as does 'our devotion' to an inclusive citizenship
- The idea that 'with freedom comes responsibilities' to advance the common social good seems to be lost on too many in positions of power
- Indeed, the 'long walk' to full citizenship rights for all in a just, non-racial non-sexist, and democratic society 'is not yet ended.'

'We dare not linger' too long in in our walk to freedom for all, for there will be grave costs if we do so.

You, our graduates, are mostly a generation that has been, thankfully, largely spared the horrors, brutality and injustices of apartheid.

You are a generation that has the unequalled opportunity and freedom to re-imagine and shape our future, to forge new ways of conducting our affairs *and* new identities, which are hopefully freed from the obsession with 'race' and colour.

Armed with knowledge and expertise, we look to *you* to exercise, with humility, *leadership* wherever you find yourself – in the classrooms and schools of our lands; on the mines, in the factories and shops; in hospital and clinic dispensaries; in legal practices, prosecution offices and courts; in research institutions and scientific laboratories; in financial and public services, and in media and universities.

As leaders you are well-aware that your knowledge and expertise must be put to work not only for your private benefit but also for the benefit of society at large.

Above all, you understand that leadership is not a function of material wealth, high office or status, or bestowed by a degree or qualification, but must be earned through ethical conduct, impeccable integrity, visionary endeavour, selfless public service and commitment to people and responsibilities.

¹ Mamdani, M. (2002) *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Ibadan: John Archers Limited

² Marais, H. (2011) *South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The Political Economy of Change*. Claremont: UCT Press

³ <http://www.thestar.co.za/trevor-manuel-s-open-letter-to-jimmy-manyi-1.1034606>

⁴ Sachs, A. (2006) Foreword in Kennedy-Dubourdieu, E (2006) *Race and Inequality: World Perspectives on Affirmative Action*. Hampshire: Ashgate; page x

⁵ Ibid., page ix

⁶ Alexander, N. (2007) 'Affirmative Action and the Perpetuation of Racial Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa.' *Transformation*, No. 63

⁷ Ibid., page xi

⁸ Dell, S. (2011) 'South Africa: Njabulo Ndebele on labels and leadership'. University World News, Issue: 165, 3 April